

A STUBBORN CARING BRIDE FOR THE SHERIFF

3

A BOUNTY ON THEIR SCARRED HEARTS

2

THE RANCHER'S UNEXPECTED LOVE

1

# Brave Western Brides

AVA WINTERS

AMAZON BEST SELLING AUTHOR



# Brave Western Brides



*A Western Historical Romance  
Book Collection*

by  
*Ava Winters*

# Copyright

---

© 2020 by Ava Winters

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced in any format, by any means, electronic or otherwise, without prior consent from the copyright owner and publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, names, places, and events are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

First Printing, 2020

# Table of Contents

---

Brave Western Brides

Copyright

Table of Contents

Let's connect!

Letter from Ava Winters

**The Rancher's Unexpected Love**

Blurb

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two  
Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four  
Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven  
Chapter Twenty-Eight  
Chapter Twenty-Nine  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-One  
Chapter Thirty-Two  
Chapter Thirty-Three  
Chapter Thirty-Four  
Chapter Thirty-Five  
Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Epilogue

Ready for your next Romance story?

## **A Bounty on Their Scarred Hearts**

Blurb

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen  
Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty  
Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two  
Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four  
Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven  
Chapter Twenty-Eight  
Epilogue

Ready for your next Romance story?

## **A Stubborn Caring Bride for the Sheriff**

Blurb

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven



Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Epilogue

Ready for your next Romance story?

## **Healing the Rancher's Cold Heart**

Blurb

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Also, by Ava Winters

# Let's connect!

---

Impact my upcoming stories!

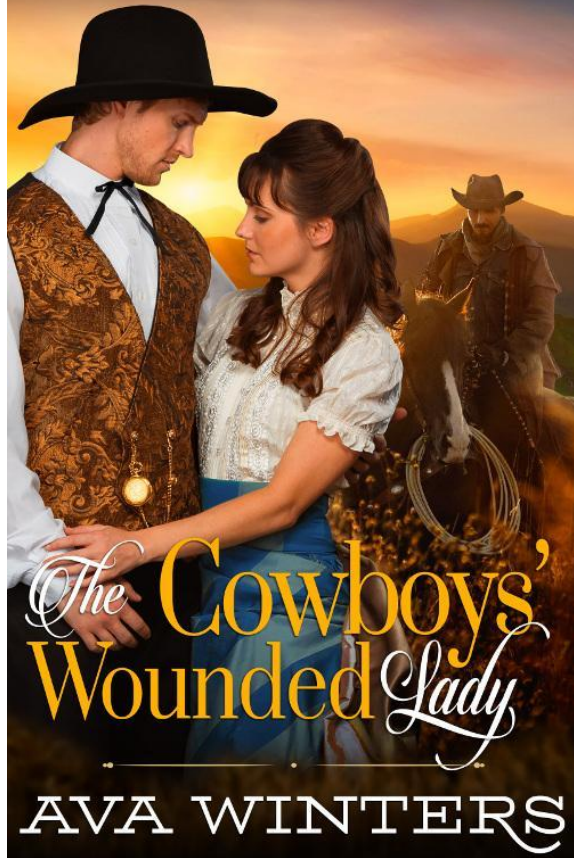
My passionate readers influenced the core soul of the book you are holding in your hands! The title, the cover, the essence of the book as a whole was affected by them!

Their support on my publishing journey is paramount! I devote this book to them!

If you are not a member yet, join now! As an added BONUS, you will receive my Novella **“The Cowboys' Wounded Lady”**:

FREE EXCLUSIVE GIFT  
(available only to my subscribers)

A HISTORICAL WESTERN ROMANCE



[CLICK/TAP here to get the FREE BONUS](#)

# Letter from Ava Winters

---

“Here is a lifelong bookworm, a devoted teacher and a mother of two boys. I also make mean sandwiches.”

If someone wanted to describe me in one sentence, that would be it. There has never been a greater joy in my life than spending time with children and seeing them grow up - all of my children, including the 23 little 9-year-olds that I currently teach. And I have not known such bliss than that of reading a good book.

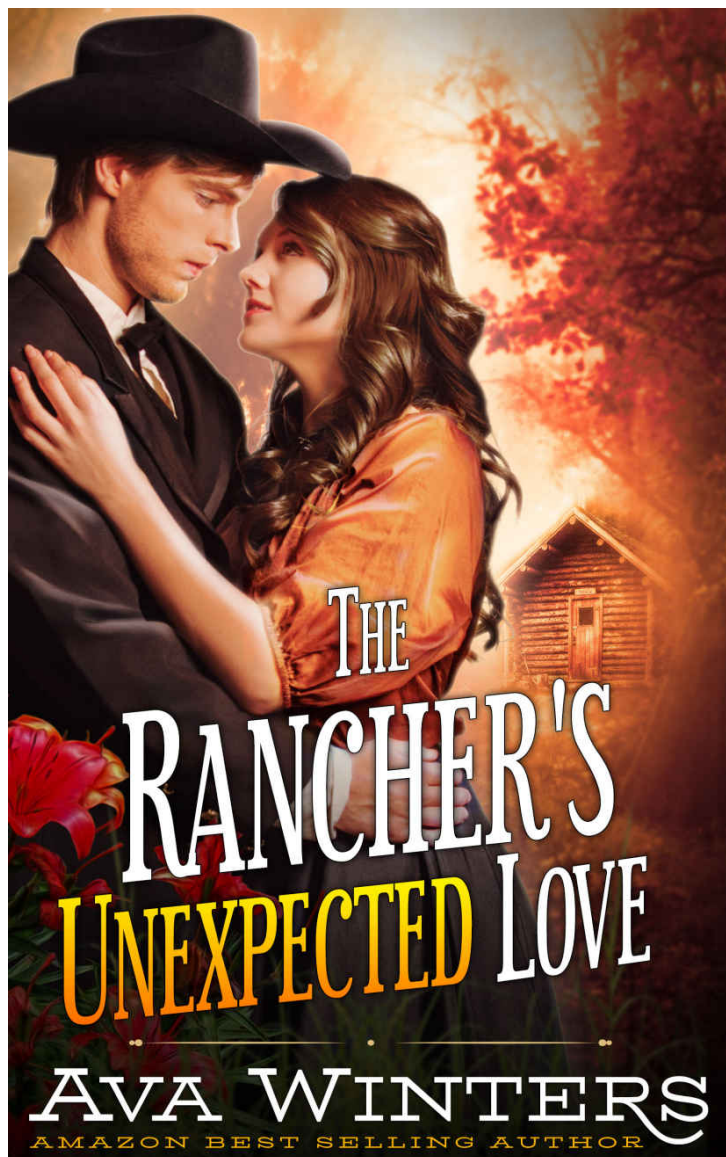
As a Western Historical Romance writer, my passion has always been reading and writing romance novels. The historical part came after my studies as a teacher - I was mesmerized by the stories I heard, so much that I wanted to visit every place I learned about. And so, I did, finding the love of my life along the way as I walked the paths of my characters.

Now, I'm a full-time elementary school teacher, a full-time mother of two wonderful boys and a full-time writer. Wondering how I manage all of them? I did too, at first, but then I realized it's because everything I do, I love, and I have the chance to share it with all of you.

And I would love to see you again in this small adventure of mine!

Until next time,

*Ava Winters*



THE  
RANCHER'S  
UNEXPECTED LOVE

AVA WINTERS

AMAZON BEST SELLING AUTHOR



# The Rancher's Unexpected Love



STAND-ALONE NOVEL



*A Western Historical Romance  
Book*

by

*Ava Winters*

# Blurb

---

**When he found her hidden in his ranch he didn't know that his life would change forever. How will Samantha and Jensen's forbidden love survive?**

Samantha Loche is a strong and brave woman. She managed to escape the fire that killed her parents and now she is trying to start a new life. Motivated by revenge, she wants the man responsible for this to pay.

Jensen Reaves has always been a straight-laced, follow-the-rules kind of guy. Being the first-born son to a wealthy ranching family, he is facing an arranged marriage but he longs for freedom.

Their seemingly unrelated paths will suddenly cross and change both their lives forever when one night Jensen finds scared Samantha hiding out in his barn.

As the two are closing in on the people responsible for Samantha's tragedy, they will reveal an unimaginable scheme that may tear them apart or unite them forever.

Caught between love and duty, can a

romance so pure resist to burst in flames?





# Chapter One

Coughing furiously, Samantha stumbled forward until she fell.

Her knees hit the ground hard. Writhing, she turned to find the flames shooting up into the sky, bright against the sunset. Horror clung to her bones as she tried to breathe, and her eyes watered so badly she could hardly see. But she could see the fire, and she watched, terrified, as the roof caved in.

Samantha's throat was too hoarse to scream. Clutching one hand to her neck, she tried to scoot farther away. She felt the heat licking at her boots as she struggled to collect herself. The stench of everything burning flooded her senses.

She had to keep crawling. Trying to not think about what had just happened, she shakily forced herself to move. That's what her parents had wanted. They had pushed her out the window and told her to keep moving. To not give up.

“Don’t give up,” she reminded herself. It ended in a painful cough.

Her lungs hurt. The burn on her leg hurt. Crawling through the dirt hurt her hands and knees. Everything ached and throbbed.

But she couldn’t stop. She wouldn’t stop. Samantha blinked the sweat away as her vision began to clear.

When a tree appeared in her path, she shakily used the low branches to pull herself up. It took a moment of wavering and clutching the bark for her to feel steady enough to take a step without falling over. She tested her strength. When she didn’t fall over after two steps, Samantha knew she would be fine.

So she started to run. The fear kept her moving. Down the street she hurried, out of the town square and around the shops to the streets lined with houses. She went to the outskirts of town and finally came upon her

family's cabin.

It was dark and lonely, waiting for them.

Adrenaline rushed through her body, though her throat was parched from the fire. There weren't any more tears to shed, not yet. Breathlessly, Samantha stumbled into the house with one goal in mind. She had to run out of town. She had to escape. There was no time to waste. Go far away, they had told her, and don't give up.

With a shaky breath, Samantha stumbled across the small house into her parents' room. She was suddenly glad for the smoke still choking her, leaving her unable to smell the familiar scent of her mother and father. There were no more tears to cry. She had to keep moving.

Trying to stay focused, she fell once more down on her knees and inched herself under the bed. Her eyes squeezed tight for a minute as she remembered how she'd climbed out of a narrow window only an hour ago. She was tall, she was thin – it used to annoy her. But



now, it had saved her life.

“Focus.” She gritted her teeth. Breathing shakily, Samantha stretched and began rapping her knuckles against the floorboards. One by one, she made her way across the floor until she heard it. A hollow thud. She grunted in satisfaction and reached with both hands to claw the board out of the way.

Reaching into the hole below, she found a jar. Samantha grabbed it and slid out from under the bed. She hated being trapped in small spaces. Shuddering, she turned towards the moonlight streaming through the open window and glanced at the jar. It was filled with an old pocketbook and money. Just like her parents had told her.

She'd rather have her parents back than the money.

Gritting her teeth, Samantha tried to concentrate. She grabbed the lid and, after fumbling with it for a minute, managed to pull it off and started counting. Every couple of seconds, she glanced towards the doorway,

worried she had been followed.

They didn't know she was still alive. They couldn't. But she couldn't convince herself that she was safe. Not yet. A lump formed in her throat as she counted seventy-two dollars.

Samantha licked her lips as she glanced over the pocketbook. Her father's handwriting was terrible; she had been joking with him about it just hours earlier. Closing her eyes, she tucked it against her chest and held it for a second.

But she had been there too long. Inhaling sharply, she buried the book amongst the dollars and put them in the bag. This was her chance at securing justice for her parents. But she could only put it to use if she escaped to safety.

As she pulled herself up to her feet, she staggered. Something had stabbed her shin. Glancing down, she found a splinter right where the burn was. Speechless from the pain, Samantha weakly forced herself to pull it out. It was large enough that it wasn't hard. She

wiped away the blood with a sniff.

The splinter reminded her of a bad one she'd received when she was a child helping with her parents' first store. Both of them had wiped away her tears and sang a little song to make her feel better. They had told her how brave she was. Just like they had told her how brave she had to be for them a short while ago, when they'd helped her out the window.

A tear trickled down her cheek and she hiccupped. Perhaps she wasn't out of tears like she had thought. Samantha inhaled unsteadily and wiped the fresh tears away with her sleeve.

She couldn't think about that. Not about the fire, not about the fear she had seen in her parents' eyes. Samantha tried to wipe the terrible images out of her mind. There wasn't time to dwell on the horror. Time for grieving would come, she attempted to convince herself, but it wasn't now.

Now, she had to keep herself alive.

Only by staying alive could she learn the truth of what had happened to her parents and bring them justice. The world had to know the truth. Someday.

Taking her mother's drawstring bag off the wall, Samantha dumped her things inside. She grabbed a bonnet and tucked that in as well. Her eyes scanned the room before she rushed into her own room to look it over one more time. For a minute, she considered taking more clothes or boots or something. Anything that might bring her comfort.

But anything else might slow her down. The lump returned to her throat.

Gritting her teeth, she knew what she had to do. And she knew if she wanted to keep moving, she couldn't be slowed down by unnecessary items. She looked through the cabin one last time but decided against taking anything else.

She had to make it to Baker's Creek. It was the nearest town, where her parents had told her to go. Get out, take the money, and leave town. Go north. Or was it south? Samantha could still hear them shouting in her ear, struggling to be heard over the flames.

A light sweat broke out over her face as she remembered the heat and horror, and for a minute, she couldn't breathe. Stepping back, she ran into a wall, and the shock reminded her to focus. There was no more time to waste. It was time to go.

Stumbling out of the house, Samantha glanced around. Her breath was still shaky, and she gulped several times as she searched for any movement. Glancing back, she carefully locked the door and stepped off the porch. The sun had finished setting and it was dark now. Very dark. There was no moon in the sky and the clouds covered most of the stars, including the north star.

She blinked several times and licked her lips. They still tasted like ash. But she didn't

choke this time.

Her eyes searched for anything recognizable. When they adjusted, she could see the landscape before her. There were the houses nearby, and the dying flames in the distance. No one had stopped it from burning. The lump in her throat itched, but there was nothing she could do. Not yet.

Nearby, she noticed the livery stables. She considered finding a horse, or at least borrowing one. Samantha took a step forward but hesitated. She didn't know how to ride.

A horse would help her move much faster – but only if she could stay on top. How hard could it be to figure it out? Her grip tightened on the bag, but she forced herself to take a step back.

He would know. If she showed herself in town, if anyone knew she had taken a horse, he would know that she wasn't dead. Her heartbeat grew so loud that it deafened her.

They had to think she was dead. That was the only way. If he suspected that she hadn't died, that she had somehow escaped, then he would be looking for her. And he would be waiting. He would expect her to try to escape town, and of course, she would need a horse.

A sob escaped her lips before she could help it. Hurriedly, Samantha clamped her hand over her mouth. And she didn't make another sound. Choking down the fear, she forced herself to take a step back. Then another step, and another.

The smell of burnt timber hung heavily in the air. Her gaze drifted across the town she had called home for the last three years. It wasn't the best home, but it had been home nonetheless. Especially with her mama and her papa. They had made a life for themselves out there.

"I'm so sorry," she whimpered. She wanted to collapse in a heap again and cry. She wanted her parents to see the bloody burn on her shin and sing her a silly song to make her feel better. She wanted the sun to rise, and

she wanted to wake up from this nightmare. “It’s all my fault. I’m so sorry, Mama. Papa...”

She should have been able to do something. Anything. To go find help, to cut the wall down, to do anything necessary to save her parents. They were the only family she had, the only people in her life. But they were gone. Even if the flames hadn’t swallowed them whole, the ceiling had caved in. She wasn’t so foolish to believe they could have survived.

Wiping away the last of her tears, Samantha inhaled a quavering breath and forced herself to turn away. It was time to leave town. She had to find Baker’s Creek. Though she wasn’t quite certain what she would do when she arrived, she would sort it out then.

Somehow, she would bring her parents the justice they deserved. They would not have died in vain. And the man who did this to her family would not walk free. She couldn’t let such a thing happen.



But first, she had to reach safety.

Clutching the bag tightly to her chest, Samantha forced herself to start walking. She moved quickly, stumbling in the night.

She prayed for guidance on her path, hardly able to remember where to go. There was no moon, and she could hardly see the road. But she wouldn't let that stop her. She had to keep moving. Don't give up, she could hear her parents telling her, over and over again, don't give up.





# Chapter Two

Jensen glanced at himself in the mirror with distaste.

His hands dropped away from the fine jacket and he shook his head. After a turn in the mirror, he stripped the jacket off. It was new and made to fit him perfectly. But now, it felt too hot and all wrong.

The evening was warm. Warmer than it should have been – a frost was supposed to be reaching their valley that night. But he wasn't sure the sensation he was feeling was caused by the weather. The only thing he knew was that the night was not meant to be his. He ran the back of his hand across his forehead. Maybe he was falling ill. That could explain it. Maybe it was just him. He should lie down.

Before he could take any action, however, there was a knock at the door.

“Jensen?”

Gritting his teeth, he considered not answering. But it wouldn't matter. They knew he was home. It was his bedroom; there was nowhere else for him to be.

"Come in, Mother," he called out reluctantly.

From the mirror, he watched her peek her head in, first. Finding him across the room, she smiled and stepped through. The door was left open only a crack as she made her way in. The woman was in her forties, but her beauty was still clear through the crow's feet by her eyes. She was always smiling, always hopeful. Her dark hair was neatly tied back, and her gray eyes were clear as ever.

"There's my handsome Jensen," she crowed, beaming as she reached up to straighten his jacket. Though she was a good head or two shorter than his tall, lanky frame, nothing seemed to deter her in making sure her son looked his best. She ran her hands down from his shoulders to his hands. "You've grown into quite the gentleman."

It was supposed to be a compliment. He knew that. Only he didn't feel like one. Knots tightened in his stomach, and all he wanted to do was jump out the window and run in the opposite direction.

But he didn't. Raised as the firstborn on his father's ranch, Jensen knew he had responsibilities and a duty to his family and their land. He had always known this, been raised on the principle of accountability for as long as he could remember. Doing the right thing had always been important to him. And what's more, he liked being of service. He liked being able to help people and improve anything he could.

Except this felt different. Holding back a groan, Jensen struggled to smile. At least for his mother, he could do that much. She only wanted the best for her family, after all. As their gazes met, Jensen forced the corners of his lips to turn up.

"It's going to be lovely," she tried to reassure him. But there was hesitation in her

voice and they both knew it. Neither of them knew how everything was going to happen. She patted his arm, anyway. "Shall we? Your father will be wondering where we are."

Jensen Jensen felt dread climbing up his spine . "Let's get this over with."

"Let's get this over with."

She said nothing as he guided her out of the room and into the hall. It was a large home, built by his grandfather as a young man. Raised in the largest home in Kansas, Jensen knew he had lived a fortunate life.

After all, he was the son of a wealthy rancher. His grandfather had claimed a stake of land and grown it into quite the business. The Reaves family ranch was known for their strong cattle, clean business practices, and hard work ethic. He'd been raised with the understanding that all of this would be his someday, and it was his responsibility to treat it with respect and pride. It was hard work, but he had learned to enjoy it. The responsibilities set upon him had always been

manageable.

Until now. Now, it felt like it was too much.

As they reached the end of the hall, Jensen tugged at his collar. It suddenly felt much too tight. His steps slowed as he considered turning around to see if his shirt had begun to shrink. His mother's grip tightened on him, however, keeping him from doing any such thing.

"There you are," his father tutted. "I've been looking for you for ages."

"Did you check my bedroom?" Jensen asked mildly.

His mother patted his arm as she let go. "Jensen, there's no need for such cheek. He wouldn't miss supper for the world," she added, turning to her husband. "He's the one member of this family who wouldn't dream of skipping out on supper."



The older man's brow furrowed even as he forced a short laugh.

He had a head full of gray hair, sprinkled with white. Though he was only in his fifties, Mr. Reaves claimed it was the hard work that had done him in like that. But he was proud of his hair, his ranch, and his hard work. No one would dare tease him about any of it. He was fairly tall, though Jensen still towered over the man by a few inches. Even so, the man's straight shoulders and permanent scowl demanded respect.

"I suppose," he said gruffly, "you have a point, my dear. I just want to be certain about tonight's intentions. There's a lot to discuss and I don't want any trouble."

Jensen bit his tongue before offering a short nod. He wasn't sure about any words that might come out of his mouth. Feeling his father's gaze staring a hole through him, he turned toward the window. It faced their ranch, with the barn and stables far in the distance. That was his favorite view, being able to see their hard work create results.

It helped distract him from his parents talking quietly from across the room. Though he at first considered eavesdropping, he decided that he didn't want to know, one way or another. It wasn't like they were turning to him for any decision-making; even if he had responsibilities and worked hard, no one wanted his opinion. Just his hands and his position as a first-born son.

"I hear them." His mother's gasp cut through his thoughts. "The wagon. Come now, we should greet them, dear. Jensen, are you coming?"

His father answered for him before he could speak up. "Of course he is. All of us, at the door. Wait, we're missing one. Where's Mitchell?"

Jensen tasted something sour on his tongue. "You said he didn't need to come tonight, so he's probably in town walking with Miss Leisel."

Both of his parents turned to each other before shrugging. While Jensen was the golden boy meant to do everything right, Mitchell was the younger son, free to do as he wished. They couldn't be any closer, but Jensen found himself envying his brother's freedom. He continued to wonder what the kid was up to as he trailed after his parents to the front of the house. Most likely, he was wrapping his arms around the pretty blonde he had adored since they were kids, teasing her as they strolled through the town.

When the door opened, he found himself looking at the woman he was supposed to be doing the same activity with—except he'd only met her twice before, and still wasn't sure what to think. A tightness gripped his stomach. He didn't like it.

Mr. and Mrs. Corley offered huge smiles as they stepped inside the

Mr. and Mrs. Corley offered huge smiles as they stepped inside the moment the door was opened. Jensen heard his mother inhale sharply, not having had a chance yet to say a

word.

“Vance Corley.” Mr. Reaves chuckled. “About time you arrived.”

The large figure took off his hat. “Always here in the nick of time. What can I say? I have important things on my plate. The food’s not cold, is it?” He lit a cigar and Jensen forced himself not to cough.

Instead, he kept his gaze focused on Caroline Corley. She was only a few years younger than himself, with dark hair and red cheeks. Her teeth were a little big and her nose a little long, but she was quite nice-looking. Especially when she smiled. Her long hair framed her face and made her wide shoulders look a little narrower. And as she walked, she kept her chin up high, to the point where he wasn’t certain she could see the floor.

He could do worse. Jensen dropped his gaze when she looked up at him. There were few girls as pretty as Caroline in town, and having this marriage arranged for them meant

he didn't have to worry about courting someone only to have them turn him down. A situation like this was prone to many benefits. Each of them had been recounted to him for the last couple of months, so much that he could probably echo them word for word from his father's claims.

And yet, though he could recite them like a mantra, Jensen knew in his heart that he didn't believe them.

"What a quaint little place." Mrs. Corley burst through everyone and their thoughts. "How lovely. You really must give us a tour, Mrs. Reaves. Why, it's just precious. And what is that lovely smell? No need to treat us like guests, seeing as we're practically family. To the supper table, my dears."

Mr. Reaves nodded. "Of course. Yes, we are quite family, aren't we? Right this way, folks, follow me."

Jensen trailed behind them, awkwardly trying not to stare at Caroline. He remembered his manners just in time to move her seat out

for her. As everyone else sat down, he realized they'd left him to sit beside Caroline. It made sense. But as he took his seat, he couldn't help but squirm.

He was still fidgeting with his collar as Mr. Vance Corley looked around the room. "Quite the place. I thought it was a little drab on the outside, but it's cozy. My business connections in Chicago would find this quite charming."

The man continued to boast of his mighty business work and connections, reminding Jensen of the conversation he'd had with his father six months ago, when they had sat down to discuss this opportunity. He was already twenty-four, so it was about time he settled. It would be quite the arrangement.

Bringing the two families together created unlimited potential. Jensen's duty to his family and to the ranch meant doing what was right for them. If he could bring the Corleys close to the Reaves, then that's what he needed to do. Even if he thought Mr. Corley was boastful and Mrs. Corley was

annoying and Caroline was proud.

Then again, the young lady was pretty and even if they didn't feel a connection yet, perhaps they would with time. Jensen's gaze wandered around the room as he tried to think of something to say.

Cheating a glance at Caroline again, he shifted uneasily in his seat and glanced away when she turned towards him. If he was lucky, supper would fly by quickly. Dread reached out for him again. He'd lived a fortunate life. But something told him things weren't going to go in his favor for the evening.







# Chapter Three

Baker's Creek.

She could see it in her mind's eye. A small town with a lot of connections, a popular hub for passing travelers. Help would be there. Good people would be there. She would be safe there.

But she couldn't see it with her eyes. As she shuffled forward in the darkness, every step grew more hesitant. She kept stumbling over rocks and shoots. If Samantha wasn't careful, she might hurt herself. The prospect only added to the terror that held her heart in a tight hold.

Panting, Samantha forced herself to stop. She needed to breathe and surely she had gone far enough away that no one would think to follow her. With any luck, no one would know where she was.

Yet her parents hadn't had such luck.

Ducking her head beneath a tree limb, she staggered a little farther into the small grove she'd come upon. Just a moment of respite before she continued her journey. She just needed a second to catch her breath.

Leaning against the tree, Samantha clutched her stomach. She didn't feel well. A shiver ran down her spine even as she felt the sweat drip down her nose. Clammy and dizzy, she wondered if she had pushed herself too far.

Her body let her know the answer when the contents of her stomach came up her throat. Leaning over, Samantha choked on the vomit, coughing until the last of the acid was gone. She spit and then wiped her forearm across her face. It took her another minute to catch her breath.

But even then, she could still smell smoke.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the images flooding her mind. It had been easy to keep them at bay when she had been on the move. But now that she was resting, all

Samantha could see were the flames.

They had risen so high, so quickly. The front door of their store had simply erupted, like she had just fallen into the fireplace. Heat had drenched her face, forcing her from the doorway. She'd only stepped up to flip the store sign like her father had asked her to do while he counted the day's earnings.

Her scream had caught his attention. Then she'd heard her mother gasp as she came from the back room. They'd called her name and she'd hurried back to them, bumping into the ribbons stand on the way. She'd hit it hard enough to cause a bruise, but that hadn't been a priority.

"What do we do?" she had cried out, running into her mother's arms.

The two women stood frozen in place as Samantha's father stalked over to the doors. Smoke was beginning to flood in through the cracks. He coughed and waved his hands. When he tried to touch the door handle, he shouted, "It's hot! We can't get out here."

“We have to stop it,” Samantha exclaimed. As the words came out of her mouth, the flames reached the inside of the store.

It was everything they had. They’d come all that way to build a new life, putting their every penny into the store. Tears streaked down her face as she looked around to try and decide what to save.

But her mother was already tugging her back, making her trip on her feet. Adrenaline rushed through her body, but it only made her heart feel like it was going to jump right out of her chest. “We need water. Water! Or sand! What about flour?”

Hurrying back, her father shook his head. “We have to run out while we still can. Hurry! To the back door.”

In the beginning, everything had moved so quickly. So fast that Samantha couldn’t recall if she was screaming or crying or quiet after that. Except now, as her memory ran through

what had happened that night, everything melted down into a slow, painful blur. The burn on her calf throbbed as she tried to remember what came next. Was it shouting? Crying?

They had run to the back door at the end of the hall. Not many shops had them, especially ones as small as theirs. But her father had insisted. Someday they would have a big store, after all, and they would need a back entrance for large orders. That had made her mother laugh, Samantha remembered, but they had set it up anyway. In that moment, her heart had leapt. It would help them safely out of danger and then they could fix the store.

She kept thinking that. They would save the store. Everything would be fine. No matter the danger, she still had her parents, and everything would be fine. They had always been fine, the little family of three that they were. It made sense that they would survive this, as well.

But the back door wouldn't budge. She'd

reached it first. Tentative after learning from her father's mistake, Samantha had gingerly touched the handle before finding it wasn't hot. Then, she had yanked on it, ready to open the door and lead them to freedom. Except it didn't budge. Her breath had caught in that moment as she realized how serious their situation had become.

“Why won't it open?” her mother cried out; her eyes were wide as she tugged on the door herself. “James! What's going on?”

No one had any answers. Samantha felt the panic rise in her throat as she looked back and forth at her parents. Terror gripped her tight. She wanted that to be a joke, for someone to pop up from around the corner and laugh. That's what she kept waiting for, yet it never came. As she turned from her father to her mother and back to her father, Samantha forced herself to swallow a scream.

There was a loud crash— they all jumped. Her father ran down the hall to see what had happened. He wiped his forehead again as he informed them, “It's coming down! The fire's

spreading too quickly.”

Another crash. Her mother shouted and then clamped a hand over her mouth. The fear was clear across her face, reflecting what Samantha felt in her heart. “We have to do something,” her mother choked out.

Grabbing Samantha’s arms, her father tugged them into the back office. “We should have something to break the wall down. Or at least the back door. Stay put, all right? I’m going back to see what I can find.”

“No, James!”

But he left them behind. Her mother’s arms wrapped around Samantha’s body, and she copied, throwing her own arms around her mother. She smelled like flowers, even through the smoke. From the hallway, they could see light flickering. It grew hotter and hotter. The women shook, but Samantha couldn’t tell who was trembling the hardest. She buried her face in her mother’s shoulder for strength.



Their world was crashing down all around them.

More clattering as the flames roared closer and closer. Just as it reached the hallway, her father stepped through. He shook his head angrily. "Something blocked the exit. Even when I managed to saw through it." He held up a small knife they kept for opening packages. "There was something in the way."

Samantha jerked up when her mother gasped. "You mean..."

It wasn't an accident.

That had been her mantra as they had moved to the storage room. Though closer to the fire, they had remembered a small window there. Her father had climbed onto a box and punched his elbow through to break the glass. She remembered a piece raining down on her below, flinching when it cut her cheek.

“Can you fit?” her mother had called to him.

He had wrapped both hands around either side and then shook his head. His broad shoulders hardly fit through some doors, let alone a small window like that one. It was there to provide natural light – it wasn’t made for grown men to climb through.

“Come up here,” he had called for his wife. Samantha had shrunk against the wall as she watched her mother climb onto the box. It was a high window, one she couldn’t touch from the ground. On the other side, she could see only darkness. Gasping for breath, Samantha couldn’t tell her tears apart from her sweat. But she could taste them.

Both of her parents tried to sort out the window. She wrapped her arms around herself, backing up as she tried to comprehend how this was happening. Why this was happening.

The next thing she remembered was searing pain up her leg. Heat flooded her senses, and she screamed. As she collapsed, her parents were by her side. As her mother wrapped Samantha up in her arms, her father stomped out the flames that had caught on her skirt. She could smell the burned skin almost as much as she felt it.

“It hurts,” she’d moaned.

Her mother kissed her forehead. “I know, dear,” she said, “but you need to go up now. We need you to climb through that window.”

They helped her to her feet. It hurt to put weight on her leg. Then, it hurt worse when the rest of her skirts brushed against her fresh injury. Breathing tight through her teeth, Samantha grabbed her mother’s arm and shook her head at the sight of the window again.

“What about you?” she had asked her

mother. "You're supposed to get out first."

"I don't fit." Her mother inhaled shakily. Brushing a hand against Samantha's cheek, she tried to smile. It didn't work. "You need to go while you still can."

It wasn't until she was halfway through the window, feet first, that she turned back to her parents. Her mother was there to reach up and kiss her on her forehead. Panic gripped Samantha's soul as she realized she didn't know how they were escaping. Her eyes darted past them at the flames that had entered the room. They covered the ceiling and were spreading. Closer and closer.

Sweat dripped down her nose. "What about you?" She grabbed her mother's arm. The window frame dug into her waist, but she didn't care. Bruises could wait. She didn't want to let go of her mother.

Then, her father grabbed Samantha's shoulder and forced her to look at him. "This wasn't an accident," he managed to say in a voice that was mostly calm. "Someone wanted

this. So, when you get out, you're going to run. Do you understand? Run to our house. Find the money under the boards, under our bed. And then go to Baker's Creek. You should be safe there."

"What?" A tear slipped down her cheek. "Who would—" But she didn't need to finish the question. "It's that man, isn't? The one who owed you money? I heard his threats. Is it him? He's out there?" She scrambled to look behind her, but the window was too small and she was still holding onto her parents for support.

Taking her hand, her mother kissed it and then her forehead. "You have to go now, Samantha. Be brave, my dear. Run. Run and don't give up. No matter what happens, we're always with you. But you have to save yourself. Get out while you still can. To the house, then Baker's Creek. Please, Samantha, as long as you're safe, all will be fine."

"No, it won't," she'd choked out, seeing the tears in her mother's eyes. When Samantha turned to her father, however, he grabbed her

shoulders and pushed her away. She dropped out of the window, collapsing in a heap outside. Gasping, she scrambled up and tried to reach for the window again. But it was too high.

All she could see were her parents' hands as they waved for her to go.

Sitting against the tree in the dark, now far away from the fire and what was left of her parents, Samantha wanted to scream again. She wanted to scream and cry and throw up. Most of all, she wanted to turn back and make sure her parents were all right. That they were safe and unharmed.

But that was a fanciful dream. She squeezed her eyes shut to stop any more tears. Grabbing her small bag, she knew she had to keep moving.

She was going to find her way to safety. After that, she was going to find justice. The panic was fading, and the adrenaline rush had come to an end. Samantha's mind cleared as she started to walk again.

Her parents had been murdered. Whoever might have started the fire, she knew who the man would have ordered it. The only one to have threatened her father with enough force that her mother had suggested they leave town for a short while.

Vance Corley, wherever he was, was going to pay for his crime – if it was the last thing Samantha did.







# Chapter Four

Paula Reaves looked at her son hopefully, wondering what was going on inside his head. Jensen had always been a good boy, a good son. But she could see that his smile didn't reach his eyes and it worried her heart.

This was a good thing, the arranged marriage. It had to be. She had prayed and received no further guidance. And her husband had done so much in building up the land around them. He had planted, raised, and grown the ranch, with its creatures and fields. Though she didn't like to showcase their wealth, she knew they were far beyond comfortable compared to the nearby towns.

They were comfortable, and they were happy.

Jensen was twenty four years old, an age where men should be married. She herself had been seventeen and her husband, Angus, hardly twenty. The two of them hadn't known what they were doing, but it had felt right.

And, after all of their hardships, after settling down in Green River on the Reaves' large ranch, things were finally working out for them.

She wanted the same for her son. Jensen had always been a quiet boy, but a good one. A great one. He was generous and kind, strong and well-behaved. Someday, the ranch would be his, and she couldn't be prouder of him. But as she studied him, Paula couldn't help but wonder if they'd done something wrong. Her eyes followed his hands as he reached for the butter. Miss Caroline Corley did the same. Abruptly, Jensen stopped and jerked away. The young lady took the butter and offered it to him, but he declined.

"What?" Jensen blinked when Mr. Vance Corley said his name.

Paula studied the man curiously as he chuckled. There was a spot of sauce on his chin that danced as he talked. "I was just saying that you're looking mighty dark these days. Almost like a native. Why, Caroline, weren't we just talking about hats? You'll have

to make sure he has plenty of them to wear outside, once you two are wed.”

Jensen’s face paled then as he shifted uneasily in his seat. When Caroline glanced at him, he only squirmed more. “I don’t mind being dark,” he mumbled. “I don’t think it’s a problem. That’s what it’s like to work on a ranch, isn’t it?”

He glanced at Caroline. Paula did the same. The girl threw her hair over her shoulder. “I wouldn’t know. This is the first time I’ve been on a ranch.”

“Oh.” Jensen scratched his head and paused like he was thinking of something to say. Everyone waited. But then he picked up his fork and turned to his green beans.

Seeing Angus starting to frown, Paula shook her head at her husband. As the two fathers picked up the stilted conversation, she looked to her son. With his tall, wiry build with those strong shoulders, he reminded her of Angus when they had been young and thriving. She smiled softly as he glanced up at

her.

She offered a short nod and nudged her head towards Caroline before flicking her gaze to the back door, where they had a porch. Not wanting to say anything aloud, Paula hoped that her son caught the hint. Perhaps the two of them would do better alone, without the supervising gaze of their parents.

It took another try before Jensen completely understood. He rose so quickly, it looked as though he had been waiting all that time for an opportunity to stand up. "Miss Corley." Jensen cleared his throat. "Shall we?"

"Shall we what?" Caroline furrowed her brow.

Paula held back a smile as Jensen hesitated. "Well, I thought we could take a walk. We could go outside. How... how do you feel about that?"

The young lady slowly set her napkin

down. "Oh. I suppose so."

"Shall I join? Perhaps you two need a chaperone." Irene Corley chuckled.

But Paula reached a polite hand across the table before the woman could do anything. "I don't think that will be a problem. We trust our children, don't we? Just keep in plain sight, you two. Now run along."

Irene hesitated, but a glance at her husband settled her down. Only then did Paula relax in her seat, smiling hopefully as she watched the young couple make their way politely around the table and out the back door. As they disappeared, the men started to recall their own days of courting. She hardly paid attention, praying only that her boy was happy.

It had always been his nature, after all. She could remember his bright energy as a young boy in the mornings, always scampering about. When Mitchell was younger, Jensen wanted to take the boy everywhere he went. They had become fast

friends from the beginning, ready for an adventure at all times. While Mitchell had grown into a bit more reckless child than they had expected, Jensen was always there as a helping hand.

He was a good son and a good brother. Paula wanted him to be a good husband, too. A good one, and a happy one. When he repeatedly turned away opportunities with the ladies in the nearby towns, she had started to lose hope for him. If there was no one he desired, after all, then he might never know the joy that a marriage and his own children could provide him. And Paula wanted that for her son.

Perhaps this wasn't the most anticipatory way to prepare for a wedding. But Caroline was a lovely young lady and her parents were well-mannered. Nobody was perfect.

Still, she couldn't help her gaze as it wandered from window to window to door. She wondered how the walk was going. If Jensen and Caroline were talking. For his parents' sakes, she knew Jensen would try.

And Caroline seemed kind enough. But would they connect?

When supper came to an end, Paula could hardly stand it any longer. Picking up her plate along with Angus', she hurried off to the sink that was set below a window. For a moment, she couldn't find the couple outside. And then, there they were, making their way back slowly on the trail towards the house.

Jensen and Caroline couldn't have gone far if they were already coming back. Paula had suggested the porch but had hoped they might wander off. She didn't really mind if they disappeared out of eyesight; Jensen would never be anything but a gentleman. Even now, he wasn't touching the young lady.

Paula's heartbeat slowed. They weren't even looking at each other. After making sure that she was alone in the kitchen, she leaned over and cracked the window open. Not to eavesdrop, she assured herself, but just to make sure things were going along well between the two of them. "You're from Chicago?" Jensen asked in the silence. It



didn't sound like either of them had been talking for some time.

Paula dipped her hands into the water, feeling for the soap, as she listened.

Caroline's voice carried through the window in a whisper. "Yes, back east. I miss it very much."

"I'm sure," Jensen offered politely. There was another pause. "What was it like?"

The young lady burst into conversation, as though she'd been waiting for someone to ask her that very question. "It was wonderful. There was so much, back in the city. There were people everywhere, and delicious food, and busy streets. I could go to the opera or the theatre. We had stores for books and all sorts of goods. No need for a general store, because each store was special in its own right. Much bigger than little old Green River."

It took Jensen a minute to find a response. Paula didn't blame him; she wasn't sure what

he could say to that. Just as she was wishing he would ask the young lady about what she liked in the west, he spoke up.

“It’s little, sure, in the way of a bustling crowd,” Jensen agreed carefully. Paula knew that tone. It was the same one from when he was learning to read and learning to speak his own opinion. He wanted to be kind and polite, but was still hesitant in testing the waters.

She listened as her son offered insights into how well the ranch was thriving. Just listening him talk, growing stronger without interruption, made her chest swell with pride. She had been blessed with quite the family.

“Why,” Jensen continued in a more cheerful tone than he had started with, “this year’s herd is probably the healthiest it’s been in years. Not a single sick calf, and that’s rare.”

Paula couldn’t help but look up hopefully to see Caroline’s reaction. Her men had spent many late nights out with the cattle making sure of that. Taking care of the cows being

birthed, making sure all the grass was safe, tearing out the dangerous weeds – all of it had worn them down at one point or another. Anyone would be proud of that dedication.

To her dismay, all Caroline did was shrug. Her hands swung down at her sides as she sighed loudly enough for Paula to hear. “Cows are filthy. Does this smell ever go away?”

“Not really.”

“I didn’t want to come here.” Caroline sighed again. “There’s nothing out here. We had everything we could possibly want already there in Chicago. I tried. I argued and I begged. I offered to do anything to help us stay. But I’m here now. We’re here now, I guess.”

A small lump formed in her throat as she tried to understand what the young girl was saying. She glanced quickly to her son, who was staring at the ground, and she knew he had to be sorting through his own thoughts.

The Corleys had been in town for a short time, yes, but long enough that Paula thought they would have been comfortably settled by then. She wondered why Chicago was still so prominent in the girl's mind. Didn't she know that she wasn't going to return? Didn't she know that being on this ranch was going to be her new life, once she married?

Paula closed the window. She had overheard more than enough. She didn't even know what to do with the information she'd learned. With a shake of her head, she decided to focus on the dishes. Caroline was her own woman, and Jensen would help her out. If anyone could help someone to love the west, it would be her son.

Their sprawling ranch had much to offer, after all. The biggest in the nearby territories, the position came with a lot of money and respect. But that wasn't even the best part. Paula concentrated on scrubbing the plates clean. The best part, she knew, was her family. Perhaps Caroline just needed more time to be settled in this new place.

Paula hoped that would happen soon. She was growing too old for the contrary ways of the youth.





# Chapter Five

Samantha had tied her skirts above her knees to keep the cloth from brushing against the burn on her shin. She wondered if she would ever escape the smell of smoke. It was already night again, and her stomach churned angrily for her to stop and eat.

But there wasn't food. And there wasn't time.

There couldn't be. She had to reach Baker's Creek. Even though she couldn't quite recall the distance, she knew she had to be close. Just around the corner, perhaps. Samantha told herself anything to keep moving.

No one had come across her yet. It wasn't a path driven frequently, since few people went out of their way to her town. Slowing down to catch her breath yet again, Samantha glanced behind her. No one and nothing.



It was a country road--they all looked the same. She couldn't help but wonder if she was still going in the right direction. The land she had traveled across felt too far to have been right. Trying to jog her memory, she wondered how long it had taken them the last time she had gone to Baker's Creek.

She had traveled there with her family for supplies. They had gone there for supplies. Her heart dropped again when she remembered they'd had a fast horse and a strong wagon. It had been a day's ride each way. That made Samantha want to collapse in a heap, realizing she still had a long way to go. She shouldn't have paused so often to rest.

Each stop was supposed to have been only for a minute. But there were moments where she needed to rest so badly, she'd hardly noticed the passing time. Samantha was certain she had missed the entire morning. Except it felt like she had been awake for forever.

Awake, and still smelling of smoke.

Her shoes were nearly in shreds. Again, she wished she had taken a horse. She would have reached the town a long time ago, and she would have been safe. But then she shook her head. Vance Corley would have expected someone to grab the mares in the livery stable, if any of them had survived. That was the first thing he would have expected.

Samantha stumbled over a shrub, hiccupping as she stumbled to her knees. Leaning forward on her hands, she tried to tell herself to stand. She might not know how to ride a horse, but she could walk and she could run.

“Just stand up.” She gritted her teeth.

But her body shook. Closing her eyes, she could see her parents again. Trapped in the storage room. The tiny window that they couldn’t escape through. The horror in her parents’ eyes. The heat searing through her skin.

“No!” She cried out louder than she’d meant to. Immediately, she shoved her fist in

her mouth, biting down on her dirty knuckles. Panic gripped her as she looked around hurriedly, praying no one had heard. Her breath came in short gasps and she blinked away the sweat.

Silence settled all around her. She was still alone.

Swallowing hard, Samantha pulled herself back to her feet. No matter what, she couldn't stop. So she attempted to push the painful memories from her mind, keeping the flood of emotions at bay. They wouldn't help her walk any faster. They wouldn't fill her belly or help her rest.

The happy memories intermingled with the disaster she had just survived – the terror and the hardship and the uncertainty. Though she wanted to tell herself that none of that had happened, she couldn't deny the smoke or the burn or the truth. What had happened had, indeed, happened. And she couldn't change the past.

She could only change her future.

Wiping her brow, she wondered what that meant. Her future. Though she had made no plans, her life had been a happy one. Her parents were good people and they had enjoyed their time together as a family. She was twenty years old – ready to help grow the store, and that was all. There hadn't been much time for anything else.

Now, the future was as bleak as the darkening sky.

As she trudged along between the trees and the road, Samantha focused on the task at hand. Her hands gripped the bag. She had covered several miles already, she reminded herself, so she had to be close. At the very least, she was halfway there. And no one had followed her yet. She was making good progress. That was something positive she could focus on.

But the sun was creeping behind the mountains, and she realized she wouldn't reach Baker's Creek before nightfall. If she was even going in the right direction. A lump

formed in her throat at the idea of staying out all night again. She walked a little faster, blinking quickly. Desperately looking for a better idea than hiding in the trees, Samantha prayed for safekeeping.

When she next looked around, a ranch appeared to her right. First the trail and a small sign, and then farther into the valley, she saw buildings. A large ranch house, and even bigger barns. Before she could help herself, her body was leading her towards the property.

The fencing was easy enough to scale. Samantha kept along the walls as she approached the buildings. A new wariness crept into her shoulders. Her vision felt sharper as she kept an eye out for any movement. But nothing followed her as she crept into the back of the first barn and glanced around.

Some shuffling. She hesitated before gathering the courage to go look. Hidden in the shadows, she held her bag tight and carefully stepped around. There were no

people to be found or heard – only three horses in the stalls.

And no one else around.

For a minute, there was doubt. Again, she wished she knew how to ride a horse. Dread wound through her nerves like a snake, teasing her that someone was just around the corner. She held her breath and listened, waiting.

For several minutes, she didn't move. She just wanted to make sure that there was no one there. That no one would find her. That she was safe. She had to be safe.

A few shaky breaths later, she had finally convinced herself of that.

No one would find her. She didn't have time to make any other decisions – in a few minutes, it would be too dark to see anything. She licked her lips and found a ladder leading to the loft. It looked empty enough, so she scrambled up. That took all her strength. The

moment she realized she was alone, she collapsed into the nearest pile of hay.

It was a little scratchy. But it enveloped her and made her feel like she wasn't alone. A small seed of comfort, the grass provided warmth against the cool night. So panicked and fearful, Samantha had hardly noticed she had been shivering. But now she was safe. She burrowed a little deeper into the hay and sighed.

As she closed her eyes against the fading world, Samantha prayed that it had all been a terrible dream. That she would wake up in her own bed, with her parents in the next room. That they would go to the store and have a wonderful day. That all would be well.

Nothing felt real. Though she could feel the shivering, now, and could feel the burn on her leg, there was still something so surreal about what had happened. Choking back the emotions, Samantha tried to tell herself that it was a dream, and all would be well. That things were going to work out. Her mother had always said that things happened for a

reason.

But her parents were dead.

She clapped a hand over her mouth to hold back the sob. The taste of acid was still sharp in the back of her throat. An uneasy feeling settled in her bones. It felt like her body was growing heavy, and only then was the truth sinking in.

Samantha tried to push it away. Her body already ached, and she didn't think she could be any more miserable. It didn't feel possible that anything could hurt more than how she felt in that moment. Except the next moment proved her wrong. And so did the next.

As she squeezed her eyes shut, she prayed. Clenching her hands around the bag, unwilling to let go after her parents had told her to grab it, Samantha tried to block out the horror. It consumed her, body and mind, and she tossed restlessly against the pain until, at last, she managed to start drifting.



There weren't clear enough dreams to impress any thoughts or feelings. Everything appeared as a blur to her as she tried to decide if she wanted to stay asleep or wake up. Somehow, she knew on the inside that there would be no peace for her in her waking or dreaming state. There was too much anguish that wanted her attention.

When she suddenly jerked awake, she couldn't tell if her heart or her leg hurt more.

Her head throbbed and she could sense that her face was puffy as she looked around. Though her eyesight was blurry, she could tell it was still night. For a minute, she wondered if she had slept through an entire day. But her body ached too much for that to be true. It had only been a moment. Just as she was sorting out why she hadn't stayed asleep, she heard a small clatter.

She jumped. Whirling around, she noticed the nearby ladder moving slightly.

Her head thudded loudly as she stared, dumbstruck. Footsteps were growing closer.

Horror held the scream in her throat as she realized someone was there. Someone was in the barn, and they were climbing the ladder.

Dazed, Samantha tried to convince herself to do something. But she wasn't sure what could be done. Frantically looking for a hiding spot, she wondered if there was even anything to hide behind.

Hay and more hay – that was the only thing up there. Not even a pitchfork for her defense. But even if she had one, Samantha didn't know how she would use it. She managed to sit up awkwardly in the hay and was just about to bury herself deeper into the pile she'd been resting on when she heard a boot scraping and glanced over for the inevitable encounter.

Samantha's heart stopped as two eyes met hers.

There was a man staring at her. His lips were parted in amazement, and she couldn't blame him. She was fairly certain that her own mouth had dropped open. Except she couldn't

make herself move.

Trapped on the pile of hay, Samantha inhaled deeply. S

Neither of them budged. As she waited for him to sound the alarm, Samantha told herself to find an escape. Yet she couldn't move. All she could do was stare at the young man in front of her.





# Chapter Six

The last thing Jensen had expected to find at the end of his evening cleaning roundup was a woman. Especially in the barn loft. It was old, drafty, and much less comfortable than the larger barn.

But that hardly mattered as he tried to process the fact that there was a woman right there in front of him.

It had been a long day, granted. But his eyes weren't so worn that he couldn't tell she was pretty. Long ebony black hair fell over her shoulders in a mess, framing her round face and stunning gaze. Her mouth dropped open, and he wondered if he'd ever seen prettier lips. He wasn't sure he had noticed that lips could even be pretty.

While certainly disheveled and covered in hay, the woman was stunning. The more he looked at her, the more Jensen couldn't stop staring. He couldn't help himself. Perhaps a runaway would make sense, hiding out in

shelter. But a beautiful young woman hiding in a small pile of hay seemed ridiculous.

Another minute passed as he tried to gather his bearings. He had to say something. There had to be a way to communicate and sort out what was going on. He blinked and tried to remember his manners.

“Jensen.” He cleared his throat as he found his voice. “My name is Jensen Reaves. You’re on the Triple R Ranch.”

Maybe she already knew that, he thought. Maybe she wanted to be there.

But something about her big eyes was frantic and fearful, almost as if she was waiting for him to do something. Jensen couldn’t imagine himself doing anything else at the moment. He still wasn’t sure what he was doing, or what he should be doing.

What was she doing? He tried to get a better look at her from his perch at the top of the ladder. When he shifted his weight, the

ladder creaked, and the young woman's entire body jerked. She spasmed like she was ready to run from him. Only there wasn't anywhere else to go.

When she did nothing else, he realized he didn't even know if she spoke English. She hadn't reacted to anything he'd said.

"Do you understand me?" he asked quietly, his brow furrowed.

He noticed the dirt on her clothes, the rips on her dress, and the shine of dried sweat. He wondered if she was ill. That worried him. She needed help, one way or another, but she didn't look like she wanted it.

Suddenly, the woman jerked her head into a nod.

Jensen opened his mouth to ask her what her name was, but then he paused. She didn't look like she wanted to be sharing a lot of information. She had to be very uncomfortable if she wanted to hide in a stranger's loft, so he



decided she probably wouldn't be comfortable giving him her name. Half hidden in the pile of hay, there was something about her that reminded him of a cornered mouse, just waiting for a chance to run.

"Are you all right?" he asked after a moment.

He wanted to see if she could speak. And something in him wanted to confirm that she was just fine. But then he wanted to slap his own face for asking the question. Of course, she wasn't all right. No one hid like that for fun.

In a husky whisper, the young woman finally spoke, "Fine. I'm fine." Her eyes met his as she inhaled shakily. There was a strong sense of desperation in her breathing that made him pause. "I won't be any trouble. Come morning, I'll be gone. Please."

His mind raced. It was supposed to be a cold evening. They had guest bedrooms, and he wanted to offer her one. Would she take it? Jensen wasn't certain. If his parents found out,

his mother would scold him for not offering her a room. The barn would be cold and damp and strange. Even the idea of sleeping out there didn't sound comfortable to him.

But then, he tried to consider her situation. Something had happened. It was almost as though she were hiding from something, though he couldn't imagine what. But the tension in her body and the fear in her eyes made it clear that she had been traumatized by whatever experience she must have lived through recently.

His mother would also scold him for bothering the girl. Perhaps this was not the right time to ask questions. Trying to think quickly, he considered his options. Surely there was something he could do for the young lady that would help her.

Clearing his throat, Jensen lowered his voice to be as soothing as possible, as though he were tending to a wounded calf. "It's all right, miss. You'll be safe here. No one's going to hurt you. You're just fine. If you've come a far distance, then you're probably hungry. Are

you? I can return inside the house and my mother can prepare you something.”

Another woman would surely do the trick. Women felt safe around each other, after all. They were always moving around together, talking and walking. Maybe that would help the girl to feel more comfortable.

His hope faded as she shook her head. “I must decline. I don’t need help. But... but thank you.”

That frustrated him, but he didn’t let it show. He’d been raised to be patient, and that’s what he would be. It was the only way he felt certain he’d be able to help out this stranger. Slowly nodding, he tried to think of anything else he could do to help her. But if she wouldn’t come inside, if she wouldn’t talk to his mother, if she didn’t want to tell him her name, then he wasn’t sure what he could do.

Deciding that he could retrieve the hay in the morning, Jensen realized there wasn’t anything more he could do but leave the

young woman to rest. She certainly looked like she could use it. He hated the idea of leaving her alone in the dark, but his lantern was about to die. His gut clenched as he forced himself to smile

“Of course, miss. Like I said, no one will bother you. I... I’ll leave you now. Rest well.”

He took his time climbing down the ladder. Jensen wasn’t sure if he was hoping for her to say something, or for a new idea to strike his mind. But whatever it was, nothing happened. His boots hit the ground and he held back a sigh before making his way out of the barn. When he closed the doors, he hesitated at the lock. If his father found out he hadn’t locked it, there would be hell to pay. But he didn’t want the young woman to think he was locking her in. So he left the doors unlocked and turned back to his family’s ranch house.

Though he hadn’t planned to say anything to anyone upon stepping inside, when Jensen found his mother tidying the kitchen, the words spilled out: “There’s a young woman

hiding out in the barn and I think she's scared of something."

His mother studied him for a minute. When he gave a short nod to show he wasn't joking, her brow furrowed slightly. "Whatever happened?"

"Jensen? Are you back inside? I want to talk with you."

Glancing down the hall to where his father had called from, Jensen called out. "I'll be there in a minute." Then, he stepped quickly over to his mother's side.

When she spoke, she whispered as though she knew. "A young woman? From where?"

He shrugged. "I don't think I've ever seen her."

"You didn't invite her in? We have rooms. Perhaps we should see her inside. I don't want her to freeze."

“It won’t grow that cold,” he assured her. “And she’s in the hay, which should help. I tried to bring her inside,” he added when he saw hesitation cross his mother’s face. “But she wouldn’t tell me her name. I don’t think she even wanted to talk to me. She was startled and... and dirty. But polite,” he noted quickly, not wanting to speak ill of someone he hardly knew. “I tried to bring her inside for food, but she refused. Didn’t want my help. I wasn’t sure what else I could do.”

As he talked, his mother nodded slowly. Folding a towel repeatedly, she looked deep in thought. He could almost see the gears in her mind working to come up with a solution. She could always find a solution, no matter what.

“You don’t think she’ll come down?” she asked.

Jensen frowned. “I think if I’d tried to step off the ladder, she would have run. Talked like she didn’t want to be a bother and said she’d be gone by dawn. But I don’t know where she’s going. And I don’t know if she knows.”

His mother's shoulders slowly relaxed. "Dear me, I do hope so. Thank you for telling me, Jensen." She touched his shoulder with a soft smile. "And thank you for trying to help her. You're a good man. But I'm afraid there's not much more that can be done, if she's refusing help. Perhaps we can see what the morning brings. I only wish there was something more we could do." Her eyes closed for a minute but eventually reopened with a shake of her head. "Go see your father and get yourself to bed. Good night, dear."

She made a fair point, though he didn't like it. Forcing the young stranger would not be kind. He kissed her cheek. "Good night." Then, he headed down the hall to his father's study. Jensen walked slowly, knowing what the conversation would entail.

"Well?" his father demanded as he stepped inside. "You two make a fine couple. How was your stroll with your wife-to-be?"

Standing by the door, Jensen tried to think. His mind was still filled with thoughts

of the young woman he'd just run into, pondering what was going on inside her head. He wondered if she had run off the moment he stepped inside. Or if she had fallen asleep and was still there. Though he knew hay could keep a body warm, he wasn't sure it would keep her cozy.

"It was fine," he answered a moment later.

He considered bringing out a few blankets to the barn. That might have been smart. Thinking back, he wasn't certain there were any blankets to be used in the barn at all. He tried to think of something else he could do.

"Jensen!"

He blinked. "What?"

His father glared at him before suddenly chuckling. "That enamored, hmm? Good. All right, then, to bed. We have an early morning ahead of us."

Holding back a sigh of relief, Jensen left



and collapsed in his bed. It had been a long day, with too much that had happened. And so much that he didn't understand. Rolling under his covers, he hoped the young woman would still be there in the morning so he could do something to help her.

Those eyes of hers had pierced his soul. They were all he could think about.

Though he tried to get some rest, Jensen hardly slept an hour. Time and again, he rolled to his bedroom window to catch a glimpse of the barn. Any sleep he did fall into was punctured by dreams of the strange young woman.

When the first streaks of sunlight stretched across the sky, Jensen was back on his feet, pulling on his boots. He'd waited long enough, and he wanted to see if she was still there. If she would talk to him. If he could find out her name.

If he could help her somehow.

Running a hand through his hair, he quietly stepped out of the house and crossed the courtyard to the barn. The doors were well oiled, so they slid open quietly. His heart pounded loudly in his chest as he glanced towards the loft.

“Hello?” he called out softly. His mouth turned dry as he realized his curiosity was intermingled with hope. Maybe she had only been in his imagination.

There was no response. His heart started to sink. She had said she would go. But he had hoped to see her one last time.

He stepped up to the ladder. “Good morning. It’s Jensen again.” There was no answer, but he could have sworn he heard a rustling. Reaching forward, he knocked lightly on a middle rung. “Are you decent? I’m coming up.”

He heard a soft gasp and couldn’t help it as his lips stretched into a smile.

“I’m decent.” The voice was just as he remembered it. Jensen had to bite back a smile as he turned his head up and went to meet the young woman.





# Chapter Seven

“Have you seen Jensen?”

Paula turned to Angus and his grumbling manner. The man had never been a morning person. It made her smile. After all these years, he was still determined to do a good job and work hard. Even when he was grumpy.

Stepping forward, she wiped her hands on her apron and tucked a loose strand of his hair back to where it belonged. She smiled and kissed his cheek. “Good morning to you too, dear.”

His frown disappeared as he offered his sheepish smile and kissed her in return. He smelled like soap, and the familiarity of it made her heart soften. “Good morning, sweet pea. You know I don’t mean nothing in the morning. But I couldn’t find Jensen.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrows raised up high, and she hoped she looked innocent. “He’s probably

handling the hay for the horses right now. You know him, always up early to start working. You'll probably find him with the cows by the time you arrive."

Slowly, he nodded, turning away distractedly. She gestured to the eggs and bacon on the table and guided him to his chair. The man always had too much on his mind. "I suppose. Well, all right."

Then her eyes skirted to the barn, and she realized she might have made a mistake. If Jensen was where she thought he was, then he likely wasn't going out to the fields any time soon. She sank into the seat across from her husband. "But I could use his help around the house," Paula added. "I think I'm going to try and keep him around here this morning. He can join you after the midday meal, if you boys make it back here in time. You wouldn't mind, would you?"

Already tearing through his plate of food, her husband shook his head. "No, I think that's just fine. I can use Mitchell. And we have our hands to do the rest. Say, Paula,

what did you think of the Corleys, the other night?" He glanced up as he ate.

She smiled broadly. "I think they're fine people." Though she wasn't certain they were the type of fine people she wanted as part of her family, Paula didn't say that out loud. She still wanted to give them a chance. "I look forward to getting to know them better. But I think we need to give Jensen and Miss Caroline a few more opportunities to know each other – they're still strangers."

He nodded as he chewed. "Certainly, certainly. We'll work on that."

"How are the cattle?" Paula decided to change the topic to something she liked better. It was always pleasant hearing about how the ranch was faring. She'd learned a lot in their growing of the ranch and liked to know what was happening.

It was also a conversation she liked more than the one before. Angus didn't mind, of course. Talking about the ranch always put him in a good mood. They talked for several



minutes until Mitchell came out for the first time that morning. He grabbed some meat and bread, and then the two gentlemen headed off to work.

Paula watched from the back door as she watched two of her boys walking to the larger barn, grabbing their horses before heading down the lane. Then, her gaze turned to the smaller barn.

It was the first one they had built. Though strongly structured, it was too small to house most of their animals and equipment now. There was a draft or two, and they used it for perhaps four animals at a time, plus hay and a few other items. But that was it. Most certainly not the best place for a young woman to have found herself for a night.

When Jensen had come to her the previous night to tell her of a young girl, Paula had seen the antsy energy as his fingers drummed against his thigh. He had wanted to do something, to take action and be of service. It was a habit of hers as well.

She glanced down at her hands sheepishly and clasped them together. Drumming them wouldn't do her any good. Only stepping into action would be helpful.

Not being able to help someone had been hard. But she had learned in her years that one could not help others unless they were willing to accept the support. That night, they hadn't been able to do anything. She had laid awake for longer than she liked, attempting to dream up ways she could bring a poor soul into the house for warmth. There had to be something she could do.

When her gaze drifted back up, her heart leapt at the sight of the door sliding open. Paula leaned forward as she watched her oldest son step out into the sunlight and look around. He was tall and strong and handsome, a good young man.

And then he stepped forward, revealing a figure behind him – smaller than her son by a couple inches, with a far more feminine figure.

Paula gasped softly. It was the young woman. He had done it. Jensen had convinced her to come out.

She knew she had raised him well. Hurrying to the door, Paula wanted to welcome them in. But then she paused, her chest tightening as she realized the young woman would clearly need some help. Spinning around in a circle, Paula tried to think fast. What could she do?

A bed. A cozy, warm bed that was better than a pile of hay. She tugged her apron off and ran down the hall to check on the guest room. Muttering under her breath, Paula fluffed the pillows and fixed the blankets. They looked a little frumpy, but they would do. She didn't have time to launder anything. Her fingers worked quickly as she checked the room for dust and grime. There was a spot on the window, so she quickly worked that out with her sleeve.

It wasn't much. Paula frowned. It would have to do, though. She shook her head,

scolding herself for not being able to do better. Then, she hurried back to the kitchen to prepare a tall glass of water and some food on the table. The dirty dishes sat hidden in their pail and clean ones were placed on the table instead. There were apples, even two oranges, with bread and eggs. She hoped the young woman was hungry.

There was a creak as the back door opened. "Mother?" Jensen called out softly.

Her heart leapt. It was foolish, she knew, but she couldn't help herself. After brushing back the tendrils that has escaped her bun, Paula smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress and hurried over to the edge of the kitchen to meet her son.

And the young woman.

She couldn't be more than Mitchell's age. Her long black hair trailed down over her shoulders, with a few pieces of hay stuck here and there. She had beautiful brown eyes that blinked frequently, like she was trying to gather her resolve. Paula noticed the arms

clenched tightly at her side, like she was trying to hold something in.

“This is Samantha. Samantha, this is my mother, Paula Reaves.”

Hurrying forward, Paula offered the girl a warm hug.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Samantha. Please, call me Paula. You poor thing. Do come in, please. Let’s warm you up, shall we?”

She had thought to lead the young lady to the table, but when the young girl leaned into her hug, Paula knew otherwise. “Jensen, grab the plate of food, would you? Let’s take a seat on the bench right over here.”

As they walked, her arms still around the young lady, she heard a sniffle. Paula gave the girl a comforting squeeze as they sat down beside each other.

The girl immediately rubbed her eyes after taking a seat. “I’m sorry.” Samantha struggled

to keep her voice firm. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to stay so long. I only needed a short rest before I continued on from Reidsfield. Baker's Creek, that's where I'm trying to go. I just didn't think it was so far away and... and then it got dark."

When she shivered, Paula grabbed a nearby shawl and wrapped it around the girl's shoulders. Whatever had happened had clearly bothered the young woman. She prayed the girl didn't fall ill.

"I'm afraid that's in the other direction. Baker's Creek is beyond Reidsfield from here," Paula offered kindly. She nodded to Jensen when he reached them with the food. After she gestured to the table, he set it down and hesitantly took a seat next to them.

The young woman didn't even notice as she stared at them with a stricken expression. Samantha didn't know where she was and had gone too far in the wrong direction. It was an easy mistake.

"We can take you there," he added.

“Whenever you like.”

Paula agreed with that. “There isn’t a rush, of course. You poor dear. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. Whatever happened? Is there someone in Baker’s Creek who can help you? Something terrible must have happened for you to have wound up in a stranger’s barn. It’s all right,” she added softly when Samantha looked at her fearfully, “you’re safe here.”

That was all she needed to say to break down the walls.

Samantha’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know if I am. There’s no one in Baker’s Creek, not in particular. But I had to go somewhere. I had to do something. I... I had to run away to somewhere safe. I couldn’t stay there.

“There was a fire,” she choked out as tears flooded her eyes. But the girl stayed strong as she continued to explain. Paula kept a tight grasp on her, wishing she could give Samantha her own strength. “And... and my parents, they died. We had a general store in

Reidsfield. It burned down, and we were all trapped inside. But I got out. And... and they couldn't.

“I couldn't do anything; I couldn't save them. So, I... I ran. I didn't know what else to do. Without the store, without my family, I... I couldn't stay in town. I had to run.”

Leaning forward, Paula grabbed a piece of bread and placed it in the girl's spare hand. It wasn't much, but the girl needed something. She could feel her heart almost breaking when the girl dove into the morsel with voraciousness, even as she talked. How long had she been without food? Without rest? And losing her family was a terrible thing.

When Samantha finished by telling them she had meant to carry on walking, Paula hesitated. She hated to say what needed to be said, especially after everything the girl had already been through. “Dear, you still have a long journey ahead of you. You're in Green River now.

“Would you let us help? You need rest.



Good rest, and some good food. We have a spare room. You can sleep and eat as much as you like. And then we'll help you to wherever it is you would like to go. Will you please let us do that for you?"

Samantha's mouth opened slightly. A tear escaped her eyes, and she hurriedly brushed it away. Then she gave a short, jerky nod. "I... I suppose."

Taking the chance to hug her one more time, Paula kissed Samantha's forehead and helped her to her feet. "Good." She offered her warmest smile. "Then it's time for you to rest."

Though Jensen made to follow them, Paula shook her head. He had done enough by bringing her inside safely. The house was Paula's, and Paula knew just what to do.

She took Samantha's hand, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and guided her down the hall into the bedroom. "Here we are," she crooned softly. "A bed just for you. Off with those shoes, sweet. There we are. And under the covers. Perfect, Samantha. Now,

close your eyes and rest up. I'll check on you soon."

Paula couldn't resist another kiss on her forehead before stepping back. The girl was blinking quickly, like she was trying to hide her tears. It made Paula want to stay put, ready to comfort her in any way she could. But she saw the determination shining in Samantha's eyes, and knew she couldn't do anything more for her. At least, not yet.

So, she offered one last smile and stepped out of the room. In the hallway, she said a short prayer that the girl might feel better soon.





# Chapter Eight

The moment the door closed, Samantha lost her grip on the tears. They began to trickle down her cheeks, dampening the pillow beneath her. She hadn't meant to say so much.

She hadn't meant to do a lot of things. How had she not realized she was going in the wrong direction? She had been to Baker's Creek in the past. But the wilderness all looked alike. She had never heard of Green River.

And yet here she was. Squeezing her eyes shut, Samantha hugged the blankets and bit her lip to cry silently. Mrs. Reaves' kindness had been more than she could have anticipated. The moment she stepped inside the house, a warm sense of peace and calm settled over her. Then, when the woman had appeared, she'd been swept up in a cozy hug that reminded Samantha of her own mother.

There had been a last hug from her mother. The last one they would ever share.

She bit down harder on her lip. The overwhelming kindness granted to her that morning was too much to handle. It had taken all of Samantha's willpower to stop herself from breaking down in front of them..

It wasn't like she had meant to come into the house, either.

She had meant it last night when she told Jensen that she didn't want any food. She didn't want any help. She just wanted to be left alone.

Though her stomach had growled angrily when he'd left, there wasn't much Samantha could do about it. She had heard him leave and then heard nothing more. Her head had hit the hay and then she had no memory of anything else until she heard someone calling out.

But he had come back.

At first, she had thought he'd changed his mind. She'd sat up in bewilderment and fear.

Only by looking around did she realize that she'd slept through the night and it was now morning. Streaks of light were breaking through cracks in the walls, and she had shivered in confusion.

"Are you decent?" she'd heard the voice call.

Samantha had hidden her bag deeper into the hay and glanced around to see if she could hide anywhere else. But she was hardly more alert than she had been before falling asleep.

"I'm coming up," Jensen added.

Realizing she didn't have anywhere to go but down, Samantha gasped. Then she'd winced, realizing he would have heard her. There would be no chance to hide. "I'm decent," she forced the words out.

Yet she wanted to kick herself for oversleeping. Her heart thudded loudly as she waited for the inevitable. Those footsteps sounded again, striking the wooden ladder

rungs. She tried to remember what he looked like. But there had been such a tight freeze over her body that she could hardly register more than the lantern in his hands and the kindness in his voice.

At least, she'd hoped it was kindness.

Dark blonde hair appeared before she glimpsed the head that it belonged to. A tanned, thin face followed, with a scruffy beard. They were shaped around the bluest eyes that Samantha had ever seen. For a second, she couldn't even breathe as they stared into her soul.

"Good morning," he said, in the same soft tone he had used the night before.

One of her shaky hands ran over her skirts, hoping she wasn't too dirty.

He was more handsome than she could have possibly assumed. Samantha could hardly believe his warm smile and anxiously wondered if she was still dreaming.



She blinked, but he was still there.

“You must be hungry.” He ducked his head. “If you’d like, there’s a hearty breakfast waiting for you inside. We can wash you up before you move on, like you talked about. There won’t be anyone to worry you,” he added quickly when she shifted. “It’s just me. Me and my mother. Everyone else went out to the herd.”

The man – Jensen, if she remembered correctly, Jensen Reaves – had a soothing tone, and nothing in his expression suggested betrayal or harm. Her heartbeat softened, for something about him produced a comforting effect on her.

Her stomach suddenly growled.

Heat climbed up her cheeks as Jensen’s smile widened. Though part of her knew she should continue on her journey, Samantha couldn’t resist the thought of a warm meal before forging on again. She found herself

nodding.

Samantha had followed him down the ladder, clutching her bag to her chest. They stood in front of one another, and she realized how tall he was. Fairly tall herself, she realized he had to be a few inches over six feet. It startled her enough that her throat locked up momentarily.

“Hello.” He grinned when she glanced up again. “The house is this way.” He gestured towards the barn doors and she watched as he looked around before ushering her out.

She glanced around herself at the barn one more time, then hurried over to stick close to his side. Though Samantha wasn’t certain why, she found herself trusting him.

Clearing her throat before saying anything, she startled herself by talking. “It’s Samantha, by the way,” she forced out as they walked towards the house. “My name is Samantha.”

He glanced over with a smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Samantha."

Though he'd started off at a quick pace, he slowed when she struggled to keep up. The ties on her skirts had dropped down so the hem was brushing against her burn again. Then, she felt the blisters that had formed all over her feet from her walking. Every part of her body ached as she followed him up to the house.

When Jensen nodded, Samantha stepped inside.

The house was cozy and well lit – and almost as welcoming as Jensen himself. And then his mother had come forward, enveloping her in her arms as though they were already family. After meeting Paula Reaves, Samantha's walls had started to come down.

She hadn't meant to tell them everything. But the warmth and kindness had been too much. After her recent loss and all the terror, she couldn't bear it alone any longer.

And now, there she was. Collapsed on a stranger's bed, in a strange house on a strange property. For a minute, she laid there breathlessly, staring at the ceiling. Her heart was beating so loudly that she couldn't hear anything else.

Samantha said a quick prayer that she might be kept safe, no matter what happened. Though she couldn't help but trust Jensen and his mother, she wanted to be certain, especially as she felt herself starting to slip away. Her eyelids felt so heavy, and the blankets were so warm. The hay had not been soft or comfortable the previous night.

When she started to turn, however, she let out a hiss through gritted teeth. The burn on her leg had brushed against something. It started to throb, and she knew she couldn't ignore the pain. Blearily sitting up, Samantha found a towel and a glass of water on the nearby nightstand. The room was set up as though they had been expecting someone.

Her fingers were clumsy as she grabbed

the glass and dipped the towel into the water. Then, she bent over and tied the wet towel around her burn. The dampness helped, though the pressure did not. But she remembered that was something one did with some injuries. She couldn't recall exactly why but decided that would be best for her to do either way. It ached too much to think any deeper.

She collapsed again into the pillow.

Eyes closed, she attempted to force herself to stand up and do something. She should make sure there was no one in the house. Make sure that they weren't trying to hurt her. The panicked thoughts ran through her mind, paranoia climbing up through her bones to steal her soul away.

But she was exhausted.

Samantha found her breath and let out a deep sigh. Something loosened in her chest, and the calm that had settled over her when Jensen had started talking to her that morning returned. It was a similar calm that his mother

had shared, as well.

She couldn't explain what it was, but something like a warm blanket fell over her.

It made her feel relaxed and safe. Letting go of her uncertainty, Samantha released all the stress and fear. Her muscles unclenched, one by one. If she tried to stand, she knew she would fall to the floor. But in the bed, with the soft feather pillow, she didn't have to collapse again. She was already comfortable and already settled. All she had to do was fall asleep.

That was exactly what Samantha did. Though she had slept through the night in the barn, it hadn't helped her feel rested. If anything, it had done the opposite. But now, she felt a semblance of peace free her of her worries as she fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

There weren't any dreams as she dozed. It was too deep of a sleep for her to think of anything else. But she wouldn't mind that when she awoke later. Resting to gather her energy and strength again was her only hope.

Anything else that helped her would only be welcomed.







# Chapter Nine

When Paula returned to the parlor, Jensen was delivering the used plate to the kitchen. She frowned at the sight of the half-eaten roll. But then she wiped the frown off as she shook her head. She could hardly understand what the young lady had just been through. To lose her family like that, to have nearly been killed – it was a terrible injustice.

“Thank you,” she said gratefully when her son glanced over.

They walked to the sink together. She knew he wanted to say something but was struggling to find the right words. In a situation like this, Paula wasn’t sure if there were any right words. The previous night, when he had mentioned finding a young lady hiding in their barn, she had supposed it would be a simple enough thing to help the girl out and move forward.

But a tragedy such as this was more tender and raw. And she wasn’t sure what she could

do to help Samantha. Shaking her head, she set a hand on her son's arm. "I'm glad you were able to bring her inside," she told him softly. "Thank you."

He nodded as he glanced towards the hall. "I had no idea..." He trailed off.

"I know," Paula assured her son. "You couldn't have. We can't understand what she's survived. All we can do is offer our help."

"Which we will," Jensen added in a confident tone.

Paula didn't play favorites with her children. Both of her sons were remarkable in their own ways. But she could admit that she and Jensen had a tendency to think in a similar manner, and thus more comfortably worked alongside each other to find the right solution. They thought before they acted and considered the welfare of others in the process.

And now, they had a young lady on their

hands.

She was already thinking about everything she could do to help the girl. Samantha, that was her name. They should find out her last name.

If she came from a nearby town in Kansas, then perhaps they could find out where she had lived. Surely her parents would need a proper funeral. Maybe there were friends who could help her tidy up her home. And then if she was wanting to walk to Baker's Creek for some reason, then certainly they would take her.

After she had a bath. Pieces of hay that she'd tracked in lay scattered around the hallway. Paula decided that Samantha could probably use clean clothes, as well. They'd wash her things. But that meant the young lady would need something else to wear. Though Paula was shorter, they had the same curvy figure.

Nodding, she turned down the hall. "There's a lot we need to do, then."

“What?” Jensen trailed after her. “Where are you going? What do you mean? Mother? Is there anything I can do to help?”

She waved a hand in the air. “She needs help, and so we’re going to give her help.” Her heart soared at the idea.

There would be food and clean clothes. Perhaps she could even make a pie. It made her smile. Having another woman in the house, even for a few hours, would be such a joy. “I’m finding her some clean clothes. Can you bring the bath around? And I’m thinking an apple pie. You picked apples from the orchard, didn’t you? Oh, and perhaps we could roast a pig for supper. If we did that, we’d have to start right away. Could you find a pig for us for tonight?”

Before she could open her wardrobe, however, Jensen put his hand on the door to stop her. Surprised, she looked at him. “What’s wrong, dear?”

He appeared to be holding back a smile. "Mother, I think that sounds lovely."

Paula nodded. "Exactly."

"But," he continued, drawing the word out slowly, "We don't want to scare her. Besides, she isn't staying. She's just... a visitor."

She hesitated, uncertain of what he was saying. "Yes, and we should treat her as such."

He shrugged. "But we don't want to overwhelm her. Didn't you see her, mother? She's tired and scared. She doesn't know who we are, and I don't think she wants us celebrating her like she is a visitor. Not after everything she's been through."

As her son talked, Paula considered his words. There was a chance, she realized that she might have become overexcited. She wanted to do everything for the young lady, but perhaps that wasn't everything Samantha was ready for.

With a slight frown, she nodded grudgingly. She didn't like it, but Jensen made a good point.

"No fancy supper, then," Paula confirmed. "We're still cooking potatoes. And corn." She gave him a smile. "But she is going to have a bath. Poor thing, sleeping in hay. I won't have none of that at my supper table. And clothes. We'll wash her things, so she'll need a chance of clothes. I know she's taller, but she won't mind."

Jensen dropped his hand with a short sigh. "I think that sounds like a plan. So long as she doesn't mind. You're a very good mother, you know."

She beamed up at him. "Only because I had you boys." Patting his hand, she opened up and pulled out a skirt and blouse she had been meaning to fix.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jensen offered.

The two of them made plans and she instructed him to start boiling water before he returned to his other duties. Paula turned to her work after sending him off to bring the men back for their midday meal. Too caught up with the young lady, she didn't have anything prepared early enough for Jensen to take to the men.

But by the time they returned, she had food on the table.

Paula beamed as they trampled inside, joking about the cornfields. She brought fresh bread over to the table and joined them. It was always a joy having everyone together, and she learned that a little more every year. Every little moment mattered. She couldn't help but smile as she passed around the apples.

As they ate, she noticed Jensen glancing at her frequently. He would raise his eyebrow, as though questioning something. It wasn't hard to figure out what.

She gave her head a quick shake. Yes, they



needed to tell her husband and youngest son. But the timing had to be right.

He gave a nod that he understood and started to eat. Noticing he wasn't eating as much as he usually did, Paula worried Jensen was feeling antsy. She felt the same. It was like she had a secret they were hiding and had to spill.

"All right, gentlemen." Paula inhaled deeply as everyone was finishing up their last bites of the meal. Already, she could see her husband's knee beneath the table beginning to shake, ready to return to work. It would only take a minute of their time, but she knew they needed to be updated. "I have a quick announcement before you return to your pretty little cows."

Angus frowned, but their sons smiled.

"What is it?" Mitchell asked innocently.

She smiled, then hesitated because it wasn't a happy occasion. Paula straightened

up. "We have a guest." She spoke quickly. "Just for a short while. Perhaps the afternoon. She's in the guest room, fast asleep. Miss Samantha is just a passing traveler and needed a place to rest."

Her husband frowned. "What? I didn't approve this. Where did she come from?"

"Does it matter?" Jensen broke in.

But she shook her head at him. He didn't need to become involved. "It's my home, too. And I'm here all day."

"That's dangerous," Mitchell pointed out.

"I've been handling the duties in the barns," Jensen reminded him. "I'm nearby. And she's not dangerous."

The boys always found something to bicker about. "How do you know? Have you met her? Just because someone doesn't attack immediately doesn't mean they might not do it later."

“By that logic, no one is ever safe or trustworthy.” Jensen chuckled with a shake of his head. “We could never trust anyone, and that’s no way to live. Besides, I have met her. I found her in the barn.”

Paula broke in before they could keep arguing. On top of that, she didn’t feel comfortable sharing someone else’s story without their permission. If anyone should tell Samantha’s story, it was her. “That’s enough,” she admonished as she gave the boys a look.

Then she turned to her husband. “The ranch is yours, but the house is mine. Miss Samantha has traveled a long way and still has a distance to go. Whether she stays through the evening or for a couple of weeks, we can discuss this later.”

“And we will,” Angus broke in.

She gave him a stern look that silenced him. “But she’s staying here at the moment, and I expect everyone to treat her with

respect.” Then she stood up. “Now, finish your food and set your dishes in the sink. Jensen, thank you for your help this morning. We’ll be eating potatoes and corn for supper when you all return at dusk. I don’t want anyone to be a minute late.”

Paula made her way into the hall as she took a deep breath.

The Bible told them to be good Samaritans, and that was exactly what she was doing. She understood their concerns. But when Angus and Mitchell met Samantha, she knew they would understand.

Her boys started to talk as she made her way over to the bedroom. Hoping the young woman would come out and join them, Paula knocked quietly on the door and listened.

She didn’t hear anything. After a moment’s hesitation, she decided to check. Just to make sure the girl was all right. Paula slowly opened the door and popped her head inside.

The room was untouched, all except for the bed. It was a mess of blankets now, with Samantha tangled in them. Paula couldn't help it as a soft smile spread across her face in relief. A good night's sleep always did a soul some good.

Not wanting to wake her, Paula started to step out. But her gaze caught on something else, first. She paused, her brow furrowing as she noticed the towel missing off the nightstand where she had left it. Then, she glimpsed it, wrapped around the girl's ankle. Stepping inside, she couldn't resist her curiosity as she went to get a better look.

The girl was injured. She'd never said a thing. But from the sight of her leg, it had to hurt. Samantha must have wrapped the towel around it like a bandage. That only made Paula wince. The burn wound was the size of her hand on the girl's shin. There was dried blood, but she couldn't see the bone, which meant the injury wasn't too deep.

Still, it needed to be tended to. Paula

shook her head as she stepped out of the room. She should have noticed earlier. How had she missed it? Ashamed for being consumed with her earlier thoughts, she hadn't even considered the girl might be injured.

"We're heading out," Jensen told her when she returned to the kitchen to retrieve some fresh water and towels. "We'll see you tonight. What are you doing?"

"Samantha's leg has a burn," Paula tutted. "But don't you worry. I have this handled. I do," she repeated when he took a step. Gesturing down the hall to the back door, she said, "Join your father with the cattle, Jensen. You have your role and I have mine." She gave him a smile to let him know all was well and continued on her way.

Though Samantha stirred when Paula set to cleaning the girl's leg, she never woke up.

Paula hummed as she worked, delicately cleaning out the dirt and wrapping up the wound. It was tricky work, but she was

careful. She had always enjoyed the chance to help others. She only hoped that when the girl woke up, there would be something more she could do.







# Chapter Ten

Jensen didn't like the idea of leaving Samantha alone.

He had to keep reminding himself that she was safe in his mother's company. More than safe, really. There wasn't any better place than he had liked to be as a little boy when he skinned his knee or wanted to hear a late-night story.

It made him grin, thinking of his mother taking a chair to read to Samantha as she rested. The young lady certainly needed it. The dark circles under her eyes had been harder to see in the dark, but in the morning, when she'd stepped out of the barn into the shining sun, he had noticed the weariness that hung on her like a heavy cloak.

Samantha had been dirty, with hay in her hair, and completely exhausted. But she was still beautiful, if not more beautiful than he had noticed in the evening's glow.

He had assumed her hair was dark brown in the sun. But in daylight, he knew it to be a true black. He'd never seen anything like it. The way it curled down her back like a waterfall – Jensen had focused a lot of his energy on not touching it. She had been taller than he had expected, as well. He'd thought she would only come up to his shoulders, much like his own mother. After all, he was taller than everyone in the surrounding areas. But she'd been as tall as his nose.

Just thinking about her made him smile.

But then he frowned, remembering her harrowing tale. Jensen's grip tightened on his reins as he rode along the trail. But there was little he needed to do with his horse. The animal – which he'd named Dog when he was going through a phase at the age of twelve, when the horse was born – always knew where to go. It was always the same routes and the same trails.

Not that he minded. He liked their home. It had taken them some years to adjust. He'd been fourteen and Dog had been two when

they had started their partnership. After a few early years of struggles, the family ranch was coming along quite nicely.

If only Caroline Corley understood that.

His frown grew deeper as he thought on yesterday's stroll with his bride-to-be. The idea still made him uncomfortable in a way that words couldn't explain. He was still trying to make sense of their conversation after dining with their families.

All Caroline cared about was Chicago. That was a place in her memory and his imagination. But it was far from Kansas and there they were on the Reaves' Triple R Ranch. Jensen wondered if she would ever like living there. She hadn't exactly sounded thrilled at the idea. What if they never got along?

If he was going to be married, he wanted to like the person – or love her, even, if he was so fortunate. Glancing at his brother, he wondered how much Mitchell liked Miss Leisel, the girl in town he kept running off to

visit.

“There you are.”

Jensen glanced up as his father slowed down to ride beside him while they scouted out the valley. The man gave him a broad grin. “We didn’t finish our conversation last night.”

“Oh.” Jensen blinked. “I thought we did.”

Chuckling, his father shook his head. “I’m not asking for details, boy, or your feelings. I just want to make sure you’re getting along with your bride. She’s a mighty fine-looking girl and she comes from a good family. It’s a solid bond. With our money and the Corley power, there’s a lot we can do. Grow the ranch and make some connections.”

Jensen wasn’t certain how to answer that. “That’s good for the ranch, then.”

His father nodded. “It certainly is. Vance and I have had some nice, long conversations.

Especially about the two of you. You and Caroline paint a pretty picture. Don't you think?"

The man grinned, like it was a joke. But Jensen only grew uncomfortable, not sure what that meant. While he knew he wasn't hideous, and his mother always said her entire family was handsome, he didn't know why it mattered how people looked. At the end of the day, what mattered was whether they were good people.

But then he thought of Samantha and how pretty she was.

Though he felt convinced she was a good person, that wasn't something he could prove. He only knew she'd survived something terrible. And that she was beautiful.

His face flushed.

No matter what he thought about, no matter what was going on, his thoughts kept coming back to her. He couldn't help himself.

There was something about this woman, with her black hair and big eyes, that drew him in. He could picture her perfectly in his mind, left only to wonder just who she was and where he had come from.

As much as Jensen enjoyed the hard labor of working with the cattle and rounding them up with his father and brother, he had to restrain himself from turning Dog around to return to the house. He wanted to make sure that she was all right. That she knew she was safe there.

A whistle pulled him from his thoughts. Jensen glanced over at his father, who grinned. "Thinking about her, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Jensen answered. But neither of them said the name of the woman they thought he was thinking about.

Mitchell came up to them on the trail, slowing his horse. "Come on, old men. We have a creek to clean up for tomorrow's ride. The cattle are growing thirsty." He whooped and, with a wave of his arm, beckoned them

forward.

As they climbed down off their horses by the creek to check on the shrubbery and look for any hazards, Jensen's head was still swimming. As he hiked around, he inched his way closer to his father. "When you first met Mother," he began, jumping right in, "what did you think of her?"

Angus's head popped up from where he had found some old fence wiring. He yanked the thread out of the mud with a frown before glancing over, his hair falling in eyes. "What? Paula? Oh. Well, she was a darling. I told you boys about us, didn't I? We were just schoolkids at the time, hardly twelve years old. She came from a small family and I came from a big one."

"But what did you think of her?" Jensen pressed. "Did you know you would marry her? Did you like her? What did that mean to you?"

People talked about love and marriage all the time; he knew that. But he didn't really know what they meant by those words. What



it meant to each person, what it should feel like. Though he could see it between his parents, it didn't make sense.

Not like the cattle, who made perfect sense. Jensen knew just how to take care of them. He'd been around for most of the calves' births to make sure nothing went wrong. His father had raised him to know when they needed to be moved to a greener pasture. They all knew how to tell if some horns grew ill and how to take care of them. For a good portion of his life, he'd learned how to raise and grow the cattle. They made sense to him. He wasn't sure there was anything about them he didn't know.

But when it came to people, he wasn't so certain.

His father took a moment to consider his answer. "I just knew, I guess. Sure, it took some time to sort it out. We were only kids. But once I had enough money, once she was old enough, I scooped her up in my arms and married her. I didn't do much thinking about it."

Jensen stared at the man. Nothing his father had just said helped. He swallowed hard and shook his head as he took the wiring from his father to set in their bags. “What about Caroline? What if I... don’t love her?”

That made the older man stop short. He furrowed his brow and shrugged as he straightened up. “Love? That has nothing to do with anything. Besides, I told you. Love comes. It grows. Nothing is instantaneous. You’ll figure it out. You’ll see.”

Jensen didn’t know what to say to that. He glanced down at the wire in his hands before grudgingly turning away to put it in the bag with the other trash and clover to remove for tomorrow’s move. Leaving his father on the banks, he considered those last words.

Love had nothing to do with it – with anything. It would come. From where, Jensen had no idea. With a sigh, he dropped the wire into the bag.

As he fixed his gloves, his younger brother glanced over from his own horse with a raised eyebrow. Mitchell was just a few inches shorter, with longer hair and no scruff. Other than that, everyone said they looked just like each other. Twins, more than just brothers.

The raised eyebrow immediately irritated Jensen. “Don’t.”

Mitchell grinned. “Don’t what?”

“You know what.” Jensen shook his head. “You’re going to try to creep into my brain and I’m not going to let you.”

His brother laughed. “I don’t have to creep into your brain when you can do that for yourself. I heard you. Pop doesn’t exactly talk quietly – you know that, don’t you? If you’re getting cold feet about the marriage, then you don’t have to go through with it. Or you could delay it. I’m not sure why you agreed to this in the first place.”

Thinking back, Jensen couldn’t really

remember saying yes to anything. Scratching his chin, he shrugged and tried to find something to say. He wanted to explain himself, but he had to consider the past couple of months. "It's what Mother and Father want. If it's good for the family, then it's a good thing to do."

Mitchell shrugged. "Maybe. But what's good for the family may not always be good for you. You're still your own person, aren't you?"

"Of course," Jensen retorted defensively. "Who else would I be?"

"A cow?"

Jensen threw his glove at his brother, who dodged it with a laugh. As the young man ran, he threw the other glove, which hit Mitchell on the shoulder. He picked it up and in one turn, flung it back towards him. Both of them laughed, trying to hit each other with their gloves until their father called them out and told them to finish up the work.

The young men obeyed, grinning ear to ear as they exchanged the proper gloves and returned to the creek bed. It had lightened the mood, and Jensen no longer found himself worrying about anything.

But, as it had done before, his mind kept turning back to Samantha.





# Chapter Eleven

Paula rolled up her sleeves as she plunged her hands into the large bucket of water and soap.

Though it wasn't her usual day for laundry, she didn't want blood to stain the towel, and she wanted a fresh set of clothes for Samantha to wear when she woke. There would be more laundry to do when the girl switched clothes, but she didn't mind. The only bad thing about the laundry was how harshly the lye would treat her hands.

But other than that, she enjoyed working with the clothes. It was peaceful work, and Paula needed a moment to think.

Jensen had been right.

When he'd said she was moving too fast and thinking too much, he'd made a good point. She didn't know if Samantha would stay after she woke up. There was no way to tell if



the young girl would want to stick around for a meal, let alone for clean clothes. The harried look in her eyes had told Paula that she had been through a lot and didn't believe her trials to be over.

That struck Paula right in the heart. She knew with a surety that though trials might come to an end, the lingering pain didn't necessarily ever leave.

When she had questioned herself why she was so ready to help the young lady, the answer had immediately come to mind. Twenty long years had passed. They had been happy years. But they had also been painful ones.

She was supposed to have had a daughter.

A little girl named Emily Lynn Jensen. Paula had spent quiet moments over the last twenty years imagining how her daughter might have been raised. Emily's brothers would have doted on her, as would the rest of the family. She would have had the prettiest laugh and sparkling eyes. The girl would have

loved to chase her brothers on their horses and learn how to bake fresh bread. She would love apple pie and sneak a spoonful of sugar every time, no matter how much she was scolded.

Emily Lynn would have fit perfectly into their family. She would have been the piece that Paula had felt was missing for a very long time.

But some things were not to be.

After their loss, Angus had wrapped her in his arms. He had been the only thing to keep her standing. And, after lengthy arguments, it had been decided. They wouldn't have any more children. No one was certain that Paula could take another loss.

Now, as she worked, Paula grew misty-eyed. She blinked several times before twisting out the towel and setting it on the clothesline. The chores always helped her, no matter what she was feeling in the beginning of the day. Keeping her hands busy reminded her that anything could be cleaned. Clothes, dishes – even the soul.

Paula hummed an old hymn as she scrubbed. Glancing around, she found the sky was bold blue and there were only a few fluffy clouds in the sky. A soft breeze kept her from sweating. It was a beautiful day. That had to mean something.

She had just finished hanging everything on the line and was dumping the water out in her garden when she looked towards the house. Through the open window in the kitchen, she caught a glimpse of Samantha.

The girl surveyed the area curiously. It made Paula smile as she prayed that the Lord would direct her into helping the young woman as well as she was meant to. She wiped her hands on her apron and waved when Samantha noticed her. Grabbing the bucket, she headed up towards the house through the back door.

“I was wondering when you might wake up,” Paula called as she set the bucket down and stepped around into the kitchen. She smiled warmly at the young woman, who bit

her lip and nodded in greeting. "Did you sleep well? Please, sit down. I'll fetch you some food."

"Oh, that's all right," Samantha started hesitantly.

But Paula pulled out a chair anyway and moved expertly around the room to gather bread, butter, and cheese. She grabbed a cup of water and set it down in front of the girl before taking her own seat across the table.

"Please," Paula invited. "You must be starving."

To show her it was safe, she grabbed a piece of bread for herself and started eating.

Samantha's eyes widened and she glanced at the plate. She hesitated once more, sucking in a deep breath, and then gave a short nod and dove in with both hands. The girl piled everything onto one piece of bread, folded it over, and took a big bite. Paula watched as Samantha closed her eyes and chewed.

Good – she was finally eating. That brought some semblance of comfort to Paula. She swallowed a bite of her own piece of bread and decided to talk as the young lady ate.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I bandaged your leg while you slept. It’s a terrible burn you have there. But, hopefully, it will heal quickly. You’re young yet. Then I thought that after you’ve had a proper meal, we can have you washed up. There’s still hay in your hair,” she explained when the girl paused, “and the gentlemen are away. There’s nothing to worry about. We can clean you up – and your clothes, as well, if you’re comfortable with that. Then you can be on your way.”

Paula chanced a glance up at the girl, wondering what she might think of that. Surely, she would want to continue her journey after being cleaned up. Or she might be in a hurry. The woman tried to remember what her son had told her.

“That’s very kind of you,” Samantha

managed once she had swallowed the large bite she had taken. Holding the food in both hands, the young woman hesitated. "Perhaps I should be on my way now."

Jensen had been right. Paula was forcing too much on the girl. She fiddled with her slice of bread and tried to think. It was easy enough for her boys to accept her help, for that's what she always did. But for a stranger, for someone who had suffered so greatly so recently, she wasn't sure how to offer help that Samantha might want.

She decided to start with the warm smile again. "Whatever I can do to help you." Paula nodded. This girl wasn't her daughter, after all. She knew she had to let go of the past. "You said you needed to reach Baker's Creek. I can take you now. Or, when my men return home, one of them can take you. Is there someone you're going to meet in Baker's Creek that will be able to help you?" Samantha stared at her plate before setting the food down. "No," she confessed in a small voice. "I... I don't have anyone else."

The admission broke Paula's heart. She sniffed, blinking to clear up the mist in her eyes. "I see. And... and what will you do once you arrive?" There had to be something she could do to help the young lady. Even if it wasn't in the way she knew best, she had to be able to help somehow.

She watched the young lady squirm in her seat for a minute before shrugging. Samantha tugged on her hair and found a piece of hay. Pulling it from her wavy locks, she glanced around and then set it on the edge of her plate. A very polite young lady.

"I don't know," she responded quietly. "It was the next town over and... well, I don't know where else I would go. I haven't... I haven't been anywhere else. Only Reidsfield and there. Baker's Creek. But my parents, they said I should go. That I would be safe there. I had to go somewhere, I couldn't stay, I couldn't do anything – I couldn't save them!"

As the girl's voice broke tearfully, Paula hurried out of her seat and around the table to wrap Samantha in a hug. She held her from

behind, setting her cheek on the girl's head as Samantha gripped her arms tightly. Samantha's breath was shaky as she gulped and tried not to burst into tears again. But her ragged breathing was a clear tell that it was taking all of her strength not to fall apart.

“Shh, dear, shh,” Paula soothed, closing her eyes. “It's going to be all right. Breathe, dear, breathe, Samantha. Shh.”

It took a couple of minutes for the girl's staggered breathing to catch and slow down.

The young woman hiccupped. “I'm sorry,” she sniffled. “I didn't mean to...”

“It's just fine,” Paula assured her. She squeezed the young lady and then took a step back to take a look at her. Samantha's eyes were red-rimmed and a little puffy. She sniffled again, struggling to wear a smile.

Paula remembered how difficult that could be sometimes. Sighing, she brushed a strand of hair from the girl's cheek. “You've



been through a harrowing nightmare,” she reminded her. “It’s all right to cry. You don’t have to be strong for me here.”

Nodding, Samantha gulped. “Thank you, ma’am. You... you’ve been so kind.”

Paula shook her head. “I’m only doing what anyone else would do. Dear, you can’t be left alone in this state. You need time to heal, to rest, to grow your strength. I can’t imagine how long it took you to come here from town.”

“A long time,” Samantha broke in with a pained half-smile.

Paula patted her hand. “Indeed. Are you certain about leaving for Baker’s Creek now? If there’s nothing there for you just yet, what would you think of staying here for a short while?” She decided it was time to try her idea again. And clearly, the young lady was in no state to return to the road. There was no chance that she could force the girl to continue her journey like that. It wasn’t for herself, anyway, but for Samantha’s sake.

The young lady hesitated, glancing around anxiously.

Paula pressed forward in a lighthearted tone. "It wouldn't be forever, of course. Only as long as you find necessary. And whenever you're ready to go, whether it's to Baker's Creek or back to Reidsfield, then we'll take you back. We can give your parents a proper funeral and find you a... a new home, or whatever it is that you need."

Samantha swallowed. "Just a few days?"

Smiling, Paula nodded in response. "Or a few weeks. We don't need to establish a timeline just yet. But you can keep that room. I have a change of clothes you can wear. You can rest as much as you like. Or you can busy yourself and help me around the house. The moment you're ready to go, then my family and I will do whatever we can to help you. How does that sound?"

There was a loud gulp, followed by a jerky

nod. "If... if that's all right. Then, yes, I'd like to stay. Just for a short while," Samantha added hurriedly. "I don't want to be a bother. I'll work off my board, too. I'll do whatever you need."

Paula straightened up. "Oh, don't you worry about that. But let's begin, shall we? We're going to finish up this food, and then you're climbing into a warm, cozy bath."

She offered the girl a wink. Samantha wiped away a stray tear and offered a small smile in return.

It gave Paula a little bit of hope. The young lady was going to be all right. It would take some time to heal, but she wouldn't have to go through the pain alone.

All Paula had to do next was let her family know what was going to happen. She took a deep breath as she returned to her seat. That would be the trickier step. But she had a few hours to prepare, and Paula would need that time to ready her argument. She smiled at Samantha and started to think.





# Chapter Twelve

“Or maybe,” Mitchell sang out as he rode ahead on his horse, “I’m just a better marksman than you are.”

Jensen rolled his eyes only to glance over at his father, who was chuckling. Nudging his horse forward, Jensen sighed. “I’m a better marksman, and I’m a better rider. But if that’s what you would like to tell yourself to sleep better at night, that’s just fine.”

His brother threw his head back and laughed. “If you’re the better one, then why I am the one always riding at the rodeos, eh?”

The trio reached the end of the trail, rounding the corner to return home. Behind them were trees and fields. Ahead was the ranch house. And beside them were the barns, where they could wash their horses and settle them down before heading inside for supper.

“Because I’m not a risk taker,” Jensen

pointed out. "I'm not risking my neck just to prove my expertise."

Mitchell looked like he was about to say something else, but he paused, pulling on the reins of his horse. Jensen was about to ask if a cat was holding his tongue when he noticed his mother standing by the open barn doors.

"Paula?" Angus was the one to speak up first. "Is something wrong?"

She twisted a towel in her hands. Shaking her head, Paula smiled. "No, all is well. I just wanted a quick family meeting. Let's step inside so you can wipe those animals down while we talk."

Jensen looked over at his brother and father to see if they had any idea about what was on his mother's mind. But neither of them appeared to know, from the confused looks on their faces. He slid down off his horse. From his angle, he could see over the animal's back into their large home. His heart thumped as he thought of Miss Samantha with the raven black hair.

This had to be about her.

When he shot a look over to his mother for confirmation, she had already turned towards the barn and started in. He was going to have to wait. Jensen shook his head with a frown before taking his horse's reins and leading Dog into the barn. As he took the animal to his stall, his brother and father did the same with their own horses.

“What’s this about, then?” his father called over his shoulder from his horse’s stall. “Supper? Because that girl shouldn’t still be in the house.”

Jensen paused to look at his mother. Paula was a plump, short woman who kept her dark hair neatly tied at the nape of her neck. She had the kindest eyes and a smile to match. Although she didn’t look it, she had the energy of a battalion and a heart of a similar size. Even as she fiddled with the towel in her hands, there was a look of determination set in her face.



Still, a tension settled in his shoulders when he glanced over at his father. He didn't like the idea of a potential argument. Though he wanted to help Samantha, he didn't want anyone to be angry about it.

"She is," Paula announced with a nod. "Her name is Samantha Loche, and she's the daughter of the Loches who ran the Reidsfield general store. I have invited her to stay for a couple of days so she can get back on her feet."

Jensen followed his younger brother's gaze to look over at their father in the far-off stall. The man fiddled with his horse's bridle for a minute before he shook his head. "I don't like it, Paula. That's bad timing."

The woman offered a tight smile. "There's no such thing as good timing. You know that, dear."

Mitchell glanced over his shoulder at Jensen. Not knowing what else to do, Jensen shrugged and turned back to their parents. Though he wanted to be of service in this

argument, he wasn't certain what he could say. He grabbed the brush and worked on his horse quickly, so he wasn't trapped there for too long.

"Isn't there somewhere else she can go? Doesn't she have family or... or a home?" His father scowled. He couldn't see the scowl, of course, but he could hear it.

Jensen wanted to pipe up and tell them no, that Samantha Loche didn't have anywhere to go. But as the name came to mind from what his mother had said, he realized he would have been to the general store that she mentioned. At least once, if not a few times.

Though they preferred the larger shops in Baker's Creek, the Triple R Ranch was technically within the Green River town limits. He wondered how he hadn't noticed Samantha before. Racking his brain, he tried to recall the trips into town to see if he could place her.

Not at the church, since his parents preferred to sit up front. His father wanted to

be seen more than to look around at everyone else. Trying to be well-behaved, Jensen had rarely craned his neck around to study the people behind them.

Not at the store, because he would have remembered her. He had to have, with that hair and those eyes. Jensen knew he couldn't have ever forgotten Samantha. Even now, the young lady's face was imprinted in his mind, and he was confident it would never leave. He couldn't explain why he felt so strongly impressed by those eyes. But he couldn't ignore them. And if he couldn't ignore them now, how could he have ever ignored them? Jensen's mind ran around in circles as he tried to sort out why he had never seen or noticed Samantha before then.

As he thought, his parents began their debate.

He offered Dog a few sugar cubes before stepping out. Closing the gate behind him, Jensen frowned at his parents. Angus had left his horse alone to lean on the gate so he could gesture during their heated argument.

“It’s not a good time,” the older man was proclaiming. “We have a wedding coming up soon. How will that look?”

Paula set her hands on her hips at that statement. “Stop caring about how it would look, Angus. Stop caring about what people would think. For only a second, think about her. Samantha Loche. She has a name and she has no family. She has nothing, Angus.”

The man huffed. “I’m sure she has something.”

But Paula wasn’t done. “Do you really want to kick a young lady out of our house during her time of need? How would that look?”

Mitchell inhaled deeply. Jensen could feel his brother throwing him a look to share an idea of what was on his mind, but he kept his face closed. He didn’t want to betray the thoughts in his head. After all, he was still figuring out what they were. But that didn’t

stop him from glancing up the stone path towards the house.

There was movement in the kitchen window. A figure paused there, and he could tell it was her. Though they were too far away to see faces or eyes, Jensen knew it was Samantha. He found himself giving her a short nod before turning back to his parents.

“Am I allowed to have a say?” Mitchell broke in after a moment of their parents’ staring contest. “It’s a family meeting, isn’t it?”

Their father glanced at him in surprise, distracted by his youngest’s jolly tone. “What? Oh, I suppose. You agree with me, don’t you, boy?”

“Depends.” Mitchell grinned at everyone. “Is she pretty?”

It was meant to draw out a laugh, but the question only bothered Angus more. He whipped his head around to his wife. “We

can't have a pretty young lady in our home with the wedding just around the corner. Perhaps we don't have to worry about the town, but we should consider what the Corleys would say about this. And pretty or not, I don't think they'd like that."

"It's not their house," Jensen finally spoke up in his most measured tone. "It's ours, and they don't have a say in it for now."

Paula nodded. "Caroline may, when she joins the family. But for now, it's still our home. She has nowhere else to turn, Angus. And of course, she's a pretty girl. She's pretty and intelligent. But we're all good people and we see past looks."

As Angus and Mitchell glanced at each other, Jensen found his mother passing him a sly wink. His cheeks heated up and he hurriedly looked away, fiddling with his hat so he wouldn't be caught. His mother always knew too much, sometimes more than he did.

"I still don't like it," his father huffed. But Angus's tone was a little less gruff now, and he

was fiddling with his jacket's buttons. He knew he was losing the argument, but he didn't want to show it.

Jensen glanced at his mother.

"I understand." Paula nodded. "But I'm putting my foot down on this. For her. Just for once, Angus, stop listening to your head and let your heart tell you what the right thing to do is."

He muttered something under his breath, but no one could understand it, nor did anyone ask him to clarify.

But Paula continued in a measured tone as she looked at her family. "Samantha Loche has nowhere else to go, nor anyone else to turn to. She's lost both of her parents in a terrible tragedy. But it's not my story to tell. What you do need to know is that the poor girl needs time to process her grief and she needs friends to support her."

Jensen's father sighed as everyone realized

that Paula had won. “How long?”

Jensen studied his mother curiously. He tried to remember another instance where his mother had taken such a firm stance against her husband. But he couldn't find such a memory. As he glanced at his father, he found the man had bowed his head and softened his features to become almost contrite. That was another first.

“As long as she needs,” Paula said in a softer tone. “I'm sure it won't be long. But I'm not going to put a time limit on her healing process.”

When Mitchell looked at Jensen again, he caught the look and shrugged.. Though Jensen didn't know how much his brother would mind, the idea that Samantha would be staying with them for a while longer sent a thrill down his spine. He didn't understand it, but he didn't mind the feeling at all.

Stepping forward, Angus kissed his wife's cheek. “Yes, sweet pea. You've made your point. For however long this Miss Loche stays



with us, we'll do our best to make her feel welcome. Is that understood?" He glanced over at the boys.

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

Their mother glanced around at them before patting her husband's shoulder. "Splendid. Now, finish up with your horses. Once you've washed up, come inside. Supper's nearly ready."

Because he was finished, Jensen took a step forward. He was eager to see Samantha again and hoped she was feeling better. But as he turned his gaze from the house to his mother, something in him hesitated. She raised an eyebrow and he realized that he might be too eager to see the pretty young girl.

He stopped and swallowed hard. Jensen had to remember that he was engaged to someone else. For a minute, he had forgotten about Caroline. Knowing how it might look, he slowly took a step back and glanced at his father and brother.

“Are you coming?” his mother asked him mildly.

His stomach felt strange, though he couldn't explain the feeling. “Not yet,” Jensen found himself saying reluctantly. “I should help Dog find some fresh water first.”

He ducked his mother's curious gaze and started outside to handle the chore. Though Dog still had fresh water from that morning, he could change it out and no one would be the wiser. It wouldn't matter. But even as he worked, Jensen found his eyes repeatedly straying back to the house.





# Chapter Thirteen

The first supper with the Reaves family was awkward. It was quiet, with stilted questions and cautious answers. Though the food was good, Samantha spent the entire evening worried she had made the wrong choice.

But by the next afternoon, both her fear and the queasiness in her stomach had faded away.

Paula laughed as they beat the rugs out on the line, working the dust and dirt out to clean them up. The light-hearted sound warmed Samantha's chest as she grinned at the older woman, almost feeling at home.

Though Mr. Reaves, the father and owner of the ranch, had not appeared happy about her appearance at supper, he had been polite to her. He'd told her that she was welcome to the ranch and meant to feel comfortable while she stayed with them. Though his words had sounded fairly forced, by morning, the man's

rough tone was gone. He had even complimented her biscuits.

Then, there was the younger son, Mitchell, who was bright and playful. His early morning joke had broken a plate, for which he had received a scolding. But he'd merely winked at Samantha, which startled her so badly that she nearly fell over. Yet he seemed kind enough, and appeared unaffected by her presence at the house so far. Even when they had run into each other in the hall, he'd offered her a ridiculous bow before stepping out of her way. If there was anything troublesome about the young man, who she supposed was near her own age, it was that he wanted everyone to laugh.

And Jensen was still there. He was the one she thought of the most, though she couldn't explain why. Perhaps, she supposed, it was merely because he had been the one to bring her into the house. Samantha still wasn't sure how that had happened.

But every time she came across him, he brought her that sweet sense of comfort and

peace. He would smile, showing off his perfectly straight teeth, and it would make his eyes crinkle upward.

She couldn't ignore the strange sensations it caused inside her: how her chest would start to thump and how she could think of nothing else while he was right there.

He was kind and quiet, but still very friendly. His words were thoughtful, and the young man was careful in his actions. Jensen had clearly learned much from his mother. That was what Samantha had pulled from her moments so far with the Reaves. The mother of the family, who had offered to let Samantha call her Paula, was a patient woman with a big heart.

“...And that's why Mitchell is not allowed to help with the rugs,” Paula concluded with a sigh as she surreptitiously wiped a tear away. “Other than that, he's a lovely boy. Simply too clever for his own good.”

Nodding, Samantha dropped her arms. They ached, but in a good way. It reminded

her of the days she'd spent hauling the heavy items like flour and sugar around the general store. Her father would carry it most of the time. But once in a while, he'd get too busy, and it became her duty to move the weighted things around.

Except he wasn't around anymore, and there was no store to haul heavy items around in.

She took a staggering step, for the thought hit like a hard blow. It hit her right in the lungs, so hard that she couldn't even breathe. Holding onto the short stick, Samantha gasped for air. She reached out to steady herself on the rug. But, flying in the wind, it gave way.

"Careful, there." Paula caught her just in time, right around the shoulders. The woman was a couple inches shorter, but she kept Samantha from falling over.

Blinking hard, Samantha tried to pull herself together. "I... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I don't know what..." She stopped talking when her voice cracked.



But she didn't have to explain herself. Paula simply nodded and patted her shoulder before letting go. Samantha immediately missed the secure touch. For a second, she thought to ask for one more moment, one more hug. Yet she pulled herself back and tried to compose her emotions. They were still strangers; she couldn't expect them to take on more emotional pain when they were already doing so much for her.

Samantha wiped away a stray tear and managed a watery smile. "I'm sorry about that. I'm not sure what came over me. I didn't ruin the rug, did I?"

"Not at all," Paula assured her. "You're doing just fine. I'm glad you're here," she added after a second. "I could use the extra pair of hands. We've considered hiring more help around here, but we'll be looking into some cowboys before we bring anyone to the house."

Glancing around, Samantha nodded. "It is a rather large property. I can't imagine just the

three men in your family taking care of all that.”

Mrs. Reaves shrugged. “They’ve sorted it out. Luckily, most of the ranch can run itself. But I must say, it’s a pleasure having another woman in the house. Let’s return to work and finish up those towels, shall we? It looks like you could use another distraction.”

Samantha tried to ignore the blush in her cheeks as she nodded, setting the stick down. “That sounds nice,” she confirmed. “I would agree that I could really use a distraction right about now.”

Anything, she left unsaid, to stop thinking of her parents.

Even as they turned back to the large bucket of suds beside a pile of crumpled towels, Samantha could picture her parents. She could hear their voices, asking her what she was up to and if she had finished dusting the corners of the shop. She could smell her mother’s floral scent and the chalk that her father was always writing with.

And then she could feel the flames licking her at her skirts.

Ignoring the suds climbing up her shoulder, Samantha gasped and grabbed at her leg. The pain came back--she winced. Kneeling had been a terrible idea. Pulling her skirts up to her knees, she stared at the bandage on her leg.

She had forgotten about it – about the pain and the bandage both. Samantha hardly blinked as she shakily leaned over and touched the edge of the bandage.

“Samantha, dear?” Paula stepped into her line of vision with a slight frown. “What is it? Is your leg hurting you?” She knelt down and studied the bandage with expertly nimble fingers. “I wrapped it yesterday in place of the towel you had used, but perhaps we had best change it out. Your skin will need some fresh air to heal.”

“No.” Samantha gulped. “It’s all right. I’ve

already been enough of an inconvenience.”

But the other woman wouldn't have her excuses. “Nonsense. Stay right there and I'll return with some fresh water.” She returned to her feet and marched right off.

Inhaling deeply, Samantha scolded herself for being such a child. She could still feel the tears stained on her cheeks. And now, there she was, sitting in the grass with her skirts up to her knees and getting teary-eyed over a little hurt.

She rubbed her face and tried to convince herself to be stronger: to be brave, like her mother had told her. Samantha closed her eyes as a lump formed in her throat.

When she opened them again, Paula had returned. She sat down with ease and grace as she set out a bandage and cloth. Noticing that Samantha was staring, the older woman offered a kind smile. “Perhaps a distraction isn't what you need just yet. Sometimes, it helps to talk about what's happened. What's on your mind?”

It took Samantha three tries of opening her mouth and closing it to find any words. The lump in her throat simply wouldn't go away. "My parents. I can't go to their funeral. If they even have one. I'm sure someone will give them one. But... I'm not going."

Paula delicately pulled the bandage away, and they both wrinkled their noses at the sight. Though the burn only covered a small part of her lower leg, it didn't make the injury less hideous or painful. Samantha gritted her teeth as she allowed the other woman to gingerly dab it with a damp cloth. There was blistered skin everywhere, red and redder, with a few bubbles around the edges that had yet to pop. But it was cleaned out, Samantha noticed, and that was important. Less chance of an infection.

"They might not have buried them yet," Paula pointed out without looking up. "Perhaps you could still go?"

Trying not to look at her own leg, Samantha shook her head. "No. It will have

been done by now. And I don't think I should." She bit her lip to prevent herself from admitting the entire truth. It would likely be safer for everyone if no one else knew.

Paula didn't notice her secrets. "No?"

"We didn't have any other family." Samantha looked away. "And now I'm not attending it. That makes me feel sick inside. Does that make me a bad person, Mrs. Reaves?"

Paula shook her head. "No, Samantha. It makes you human. No child should have to go through what you've endured. No child, no person. Wherever your parents are now, I promise you that they would be proud of you for your strength. You've a very strong young lady."

Samantha appreciated the words, even if she didn't feel them. She managed a smile. But she twitched at the pain as Paula wrapped a new bandage around her. "Thank you. For everything. Do you really think someone gave my parents a burial?"

“I do. We’re all human and I think, deep down, we’re all good people. We all want kindness and we’re all willing to give it. When you’re feeling up to it, Samantha, when you’re ready, I’ll accompany you to visit their graves. If that’s what you would want.”

Her heart warmed at the woman’s generosity. Smiling, she nodded. “I would like that very much. Thank you. I don’t know how I can ever thank you enough, Mrs. Reaves.”

“You can start by calling me Paula,” the older woman said with a wink. Finished with the bandaging, she sat back and sighed. “I meant what I said earlier. Having you here, as difficult as I know it must be for you, has been a breath of fresh air that was much needed in this house. Loss is a terrible thing to endure. Especially alone.

“Nearly twenty years ago,” she confessed, “I lost someone, too.”

Samantha’s eyes widened. “Who?”

Pain cracked in the woman's face even as she smiled. "A daughter. A baby girl. We named her Emily. But the birth went wrong and she never had a chance to take a breath after I labored for two days with her. It was a very difficult time. My boys were too young to understand. My husband, Angus, he tried. We all had lost someone together.

"But it wasn't the same for them as it was for me. I had been the one to carry her in my womb for all those months. We had been expecting a healthy child. We wanted a whole barrellful of children, you know. That was always the plan."

Silence settled between the two women.

It made Samantha's heart hurt for Paula, though she could never imagine that type of loss. But she knew what the woman was saying. There was a hurt that no one could understand unless they'd been through exactly the same situation.



Samantha shifted her skirts and scooted over to take Paula's hand. "That must have been very hard," she said simply. Then, she set her head on Paula's shoulder.

The older woman's shaky breath was answer enough, even before she said anything. "Indeed. I didn't mean to tell you that, Samantha, but it felt right – like the Lord was telling me you had to know. Emily would have been about your age, I'd like to think, and I would hope she would have been like you. Brave and kind."

"You hardly know me," Samantha murmured, worried that her new friend was too generous.

Paula squeezed her hand. "I know you enough." She sucked in a deep breath and chuckled. They straightened up and exchanged soft smiles. "Let's finish the laundry." Paula cleared her throat. "We can talk as we work, or we'll never finish anything."

The sobering moment ended, but the weight of their conversation stayed in

Samantha's heart through the afternoon. It was hard to put into words what had happened, but she knew she could trust Paula Reaves with the world.





# Chapter Fourteen

Before Jensen knew it, a week had passed them by.

Samantha Loche had stayed on the Triple R Ranch for seven days. And there still wasn't any more conversation about her leaving. Jensen kept on his toes, waiting and worried that the topic would come up. Except it never did. And he certainly wasn't going to be the first.

Even after interacting with her daily since her arrival, he still wasn't certain what it was about the young woman that held his attention so strongly. There was something about her that he couldn't stop thinking about.

“Hey!”

Something landed on his foot, and Jensen jumped out of surprise more than pain. Eyes wide, he shoved the hay bale aside and glared at Mitchell for tossing it so roughly. The young

man stood on three large stacks, grinning as he looked down.

“It’s hay,” Mitchell pointed out. “But it’s also a greeting, because someone can’t focus today.”

Jensen shot a glance at his father, who was still working with another bundle a few yards away. Then he turned back to his younger brother. “I’m focused just fine. I’m just waiting for you to do your job right, that’s all.” He grinned back.

His younger brother laughed before tossing another bundle to him. Jensen caught it deftly and set it on top of the first one, which had landed on his foot. If he had been barefoot, it might have hurt. But he had sturdy boots and he’d been hit by harder things before. There were scars from the past with his family learning to run the ranch and to learn the work. They all had a few scars.

But it was just the way of the work. He didn’t mind. There was something refreshing about the fresh air in his lungs and the sweat

dripping down his forehead. The sun was hardly up, but the three of them had been in the fields for a couple of hours.

“If you keep looking into the sun like you are,” Mitchell pointed out, “you’re going to go blind. Bring your head out of the clouds. You can think about your girl later.”

Jensen staggered when the next bale was tossed to him. He stared at his brother. “My girl?”

Samantha’s pretty face came to mind, framed perfectly by her dark hair. Her smile from that morning made Jensen’s heart thump and he wondered what she was up to for the day. If he was honest with himself, he wondered that every time he left her with his mother in the mornings.

Mitchell nodded, wiping his forehead with the back of his arm. “Sure. It’s clear as day right there on your face. The two of you will be together soon enough. But you should probably focus on the work right now, or the next bale lands on your face.”

“Thanks,” Jensen replied dryly before setting the one in his arms down. Then he frowned at the insinuation that Mitchell had made. “What makes you think she’s my girl?”

Thankfully, the next bale didn’t hit him. Jensen caught it deftly as his brother chuckled. “You’re marrying her in two months, aren’t you?”

He set it down but stood still for a minute to catch his breath. Backtracking, Jensen realized that Mitchell was talking about Caroline.

Of course, he hadn’t suggested it would be Samantha. Why would it be Samantha?

Jensen wasn’t marrying Samantha. He was marrying Caroline Corley.

He shook his head to clear his mind. Even then, his heart was still thumping loudly in his chest. Cheating another glance at his father, he saw that the man was hardly paying



attention to them. That was probably for the better. Jensen tried to keep the heat from rising up his neck as he refocused.

He was marrying Caroline. That was the woman he was marrying.

“Well?” Mitchell sang out in a teasing voice.

“Just hand me the next bale,” Jensen sighed.

It was better he didn't say anything. That way, he wouldn't get his thoughts mixed up again, and he couldn't say something that would make trouble for everyone. All he had to do, Jensen decided, was focus.

So he got back to work. For the next hour, the three of them worked on the hay bales. Most everything had already been cut and only needed to be set into bales to be put away for the winter. They had a good portion in the barn already, but they needed more. Not only did it feed the horses, but it worked

as a fuel source and it was something they could sell if they had enough.

They were finishing the southwest end of the field when all three of them heard a cart wheeling down the lane with a horse in the lead. Glancing over his shoulder, Jensen saw his mother driving up.

She waved once she was close enough. Only when she reached her husband did she pull the horse to a stop. "The Dalleys stopped by and need some help. One of their horses is sick. I want to go see what I can do to help them."

Both Mitchell and Jensen glanced at their father, who sighed. He stood up from the hay bale he'd been sitting on and wiped his hands. "It's that mare of theirs, isn't it? I told them they were overfeeding her."

Paula gave him a stern look. "We're not people to judge. We're only here to help. I brought you boys some food to hold you over."

“Are you going alone?” Mitchell asked. “The Dalleys are a few miles north.”

“They’ve been going to each house asking for help,” Paula explained. “No one’s been willing. I told them I’d come straight over. I’m not going to leave them alone during a time like this. The mare is expecting, and we all know how much they need those horses with their big family.”

Pulling himself to his feet, their father straightened up. “All right, fine. I’ll come along.”

Jensen rolled his eyes. His father was a hard-working man, the best, but he would also be the first who was ready to be finished, if provided with a good enough excuse. Especially when the excuse included some time with his wife. He smiled as he accepted the basket that his mother pulled out of the cart.

“We won’t be gone long,” she assured

them, beaming now that she wasn't riding alone. Jensen watched his parents exchange a look and chuckled. "Oh, hush," his mother admonished.

"Have fun." Mitchell waved. "And try not to kill the horse when you two are looking at each other like that."

Their father grumbled at them, "Just finish the bales, would you? We'll be back before supper. Here, dear, I'll take the reins now."

Mitchell stepped up beside Jensen as they watched their parents head down the lane. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that the Dalleys and their horse were just fine – this was just an excuse for the two of them to have a quiet afternoon together.

But whether it was true or not, he didn't mind. Jensen shook his head and turned to the basket. He and Mitchell split the food, gobbling pieces of chicken between bites of the hard cheese.

As their parents disappeared through the fields, Jensen found himself craving some particular company, as well. Samantha came back to mind and he wondered if she felt comfortable being in the big house all alone. His eyes skirted past his brother towards the lane back to the house.

She'd been there for a week. Though the two of them didn't spend a lot of time together, Samantha was always with the family in the evenings. Supper had become his favorite time of day, lately, when everyone sat down and talked. It was easy to pull her into conversation then, and it didn't look strange. He mostly just liked being able to make her smile.

Part of him knew it was wrong, knew that he should look forward to Caroline's visits the same way. That his heart should pound and his palms should sweat when he saw her – his future wife. But the woman from Chicago didn't mean anything to him. At least, not yet.

As he chewed, Jensen thought about the

two young ladies. He'd been trying to not think about them, but Samantha was never too far from his mind. Just that morning, their fingers had touched when he passed her a bowl of apples. It had felt like he'd been struck with lightning. His stomach clenched as he wondered if it would happen again. Perhaps it had simply been a coincidence.

His eyes skirted to where his father had disappeared. The man was watching him more closely, as they had begun having conversations about the wedding and what it would mean for Jensen to someday run the ranch. His father still wasn't eager to have Samantha there, but he hadn't said anything out loud since Paula had decided Samantha would stay with them.

Now, his father was out of the house and out of the fields. Sweat trickled down Jensen's spine and he inhaled slowly as an idea came to mind.

"We shouldn't leave the basket out here," Jensen announced after a moment. He turned to his brother with what he hoped was a blank

expression. “Here, take the last piece of cheese. I’ll drop it off at the house.”

Mitchell hardly paid attention, nodding as he continued chewing away. As he headed back to the hay, Jensen turned in the other direction. His heart hammered as he made his way back up the path to the house. He passed the fields and the barn until he had reached the front door.

It was his home, so he didn’t need to knock. But something made him stop. He couldn’t bring himself to step inside. Not yet. Jensen swallowed once, and then again.

He shifted the basket between his hands to dry them against his pants as he gathered the courage to grasp the doorknob.

“Anybody home?”

Jensen stepped through the doorway slowly, not wanting to startle anyone. It almost felt as though he were a guest in his own home. He had almost knocked, but had

prevented himself from doing so just in time. Still, he paused after his first step inside.

There were footsteps. Soft, pattering ones that grew closer from the kitchen.

“Hello? Yes?”

From down the hall appeared Samantha Loche. She peeked her head around the corner as her long bundle of hair slipped over her shoulder. The sight reminded him of a weeping willow, with lengthy leaves dancing in the wind. Her eyes were bright as she noticed him, widening slightly.

Jensen hesitated and then smiled. She did the same. It was slow, but it grew wider as she straightened up and waved him over. “Jensen. What are you doing back so soon?”

He didn’t need any more invitation. Pushing his shoulders back, Jensen followed her into the kitchen. “Here we are. I just wanted to bring the basket back. That way, you know, it wouldn’t become dirty. Or



broken. Or anything else.”

The young lady turned back with a soft smile and a nod. “That’s considerate of you. It’s your mother’s basket, and I’m sure she appreciates your kindness. It’s hard work out there, isn’t it?” She gestured towards the open window.

Shrugging, Jensen leaned against the table and tried to act casual. First, he crossed his arms. Then he dropped them by his sides. But nothing felt natural. He rubbed his neck and shrugged. “Hard? I guess. I don’t know. I’m used to it, I suppose.”

“It’s a good thing you’re here,” Samantha offered as she pulled out a large bottle. “I’ve made some lemonade and it’s still cool. Can I pour you a glass?”

He straightened up. “Lemonade?”

Their eyes met for a moment, and then she ducked down again with a nod. She spoke hesitantly. “Yes. It’s both bitter and sweet, if

you've never had it before."

"I have," he assured her quickly, "I just haven't had any for a while. Yes, I'd love a glass." Stepping over to the counter, he found himself only a foot away from her as she poured him a cup. He leaned to the side and pulled another glass forward. "You'll have a drink with me, won't you?"

She paused, glancing at it, and then nodded. "I think I will, thank you."

A light blush spread across her cheeks. The tension in Jensen's shoulders faded as he accepted the glass from her. For a brief moment, his fingers brushed against hers. It felt like lightning passing through his limbs.

"Thank you," he corrected, his heart pounding hard inside his chest. Then, not wanting to lose his courage, Jensen cleared his throat. "Would you like to take a walk with me?"

Samantha bit her lip. "Oh, I don't know. I

have some chores to take care of.”

“But we have lemonade,” Jensen reminded her quickly. “It’s a trade. You gave me a drink, and I’m giving you permission to take a break. Just a walk around the house?”

The young lady hesitated, dropping her gaze to glance around the room for a moment. Jensen found himself worried that he was asking her to do much. But they couldn’t possibly be doing anything wrong. And she couldn’t have anything too serious to be working on at the moment.

Or perhaps he was only imagining anything between them.

But then she glanced up and smiled. “A walk sounds lovely.”





# Chapter Fifteen

Jensen was tall, blond, and handsome.

That could not be denied, especially with his kind smile that made his eyes crinkle when he glanced down at her. She wasn't sure whether it was his looks or his kindness that made her cheeks flush heatedly in those moments.

But whatever it was, she couldn't stop it.

Samantha lowered her head and swallowed hard, trying to keep her thoughts focused as he opened the door for her and they stepped down off the porch. Each of them held a glass of lemonade. Trying to keep her hands from shaking, Samantha used both hands to hold onto it. She wanted to tell Jensen that it wasn't her best batch, and she could do better, but her tongue was in a knot.

Her eyes turned down to the tall glass she carried before her, careful not to spill a single

drop. Though she was thirsty, Samantha worried about spilling all over herself if she tried to take a sip. She didn't want to embarrass herself in front of any of the Reaves. Especially Jensen.

When she glanced up again, she blushed once more to find him looking at her. The man offered a small smile. Not a silly one or a proud one. A kind one.

“How have you been faring?” he asked.

She inhaled deeply. “Well, thank you. It's a lovely home your family has. And... and everyone's been very generous. I didn't think I would be here so long, of course. And I won't be much longer,” she added hurriedly, not wanting him to think she was taking advantage of their goodwill.

The young man just shrugged, gulping down the lemonade. “My mother meant it when she said you can stay as long as you like. I wouldn't fault you for wanting to stay forever. It is a nice home. And we like having you here. You brighten up the place.”

Samantha bit her bottom lip to hold back the smile. “You’re too kind. After everything you’ve done for me, I should be thanking you over and over.”

He chuckled at that. “Please don’t. It would make for a very boring conversation. Instead,” he proposed brightly, “you can tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“What? Where? Do you mean in the house?” Samantha glanced at the building. “It’s not that entertaining, Jensen. Cooking, cleaning, laundry. I’m not sure any of that would interest you. You probably know all about those chores.” Then she darted another glance at him. “But what about you?”

Jensen raised an eyebrow. “What about me?”

She gave him a look. “What I meant was, what do you do out in the fields? With the cows and the bulls? I don’t know what it’s like on a ranch. I’ve only been in Kansas for a few



years--Mississippi for the rest, and we don't have ranches there."

The young man nodded slowly as he appeared to be thinking. And then, as they rounded the first corner, he cleared his throat. "It's about what you might expect. There's hay to grow and cut. We feed our animals and train new ones, mostly horses.

"We take care of the barns, raise the animals. Clear the land to move the herds. It's not very exciting, I'm afraid." He glanced down at his now empty glass with a sigh. "Not that it's not enjoyable. It's hard, but it's fulfilling. From moving manure to clearing the riverbed or moving the cows – I like all of it. But I'm sure I'm boring you by now."

She shook her head. "No, of course not. What is your favorite part of living on a ranch?"

He hesitated only for a minute before diving in about riding his horse in the fields near their cows. He talked about the sunrise and the sunset, about taking care of sick calves

and raising young fillies. The casualness of his first statement faded away as Jensen spilled his feelings to Samantha about all the beautiful things that happened upon the Triple R Ranch.

Conversation flowed easily between the two of them. Soon, Samantha couldn't keep the smile off her face. They rounded the house twice with the sun shining down on them. Her heart felt light and she found herself laughing more than once.

When he told another joke, she giggled and covered her mouth with one hand. Then she glanced up at him and shook her head. He was a remarkable young man. Though she had already been enjoying their supper time together with the rest of his family, this was the first opportunity they'd had to indulge in such a long conversation without anyone else present.

Jensen paused, taking a step back. His eyes studied her thoughtfully as she swallowed the final chuckle and cocked her head in return. "What? What is it?" She ran a hand

through her hair in embarrassment as she touched her face.

But he shook his head. “No, it’s all right. There’s nothing... There’s nothing wrong. Rather, it might be right. I don’t know. I suppose what I’m trying to say is that you don’t seem so worried anymore. I can see it in your eyes.”

“See what?” she asked curiously.

His own eyes crinkled up. “I’m not certain. You came here like a shadow: dark and alone and weighed down. It was in your face. But now, I can see there’s less weighing you down. You look better. Hopeful, I should say,” he amended quickly when her brow furrowed. “I don’t mean to make your loss any less than it was. I’m deeply sorry for all that you endured.”

The words were as tender as they were sober. She could hear it and she could feel it. Her heart softened in her chest as he spoke. When she looked up, he was looking back at her. And he wasn’t afraid to look her in the

eye. It caught her by surprise, but her walls didn't climb back up. Instead, she accepted his words and honesty.

Still, it took her a minute to breathe. She had to remove her parents' last expressions from her mind.

Samantha nodded slowly as she offered a strained smile. "Thank you, Jensen. That is... kind of you. I appreciate it. I only hope that no one you know will ever have to suffer such a similar loss."

The words came out before she could help herself. It wasn't on purpose. After all, he wouldn't understand. She hadn't told him or anyone else. At least not yet. Samantha thought back to that night not long ago, back when her parents were calling out and the flames were screaming even louder.

It had become a mantra in her mind that she recited every night. The fire was not an accident. Her parents had been murdered. She had barely escaped. It was not an accident, because Mr. Vance Corley had tried to murder

them. He'd owed them money, and he'd wanted them dead.

Her parents were dead, and it was not an accident. And somehow, she was going to make sure that he would be caught for his terrible actions. He would be caught and locked away so he could never do that to anyone else – so he could never hurt anyone else.

No one else would suffer at Mr. Corley's hands, if she could do anything about it.

“Samantha?”

Her breath caught as Jensen touched her hand. His fingers were rough, though gentle. But she jerked away. She didn't mean to, but it happened when she wasn't thinking. Samantha pulled herself back into the moment. “I'm sorry. My thoughts were wandering. But thank you for your kind words.”

He looked at her for a moment and then nodded. His eyes slowly left hers as he glanced

ahead. They had made it back to the front steps of the grand ranch house before she had realized it. Her eyes followed his to the front door. She supposed it was time to return inside.

After all, it had only been a break. Jensen couldn't stay there all afternoon. And she had agreed to prepare supper that evening since Paula wouldn't return for another hour, at least. There was a lot to do with only a little time left. It was reasonable for her to return inside.

And yet, she didn't want to leave Jensen.

Even after their cheerful conversation had stalled, she wanted to keep talking to him. She wanted to ask him about the first Kansas sunrise he could remember, the first time he had helped birth a calf, the last time he'd gone riding into the valley below. Samantha wanted to watch his lips move and his eyes sparkle. There was something about Jensen that made her heart warm up. She couldn't explain the sensation, only that she liked the way it felt.

“I should probably return to the fields,” Jensen said slowly. When she caught his gaze, he jerked his head towards the door.

Both of them headed up the steps. They didn’t move quickly, however, as though they were trying to preserve their few final moments together. She glanced at their feet as they moved in sync. Jensen opened the door for her, and she ducked her head as she stepped inside. He followed her to the kitchen, where they both set their glasses down on the table.

“Well, I should go.” He scratched his head. “There’s still work to do.”

She nodded, wondering why he wasn’t turning away. But she was glad, too. “Yes. And there’s supper to prepare.” Samantha bit her lip. “Your parents should return soon.”

Still, he didn’t go just yet. He was watching her thoughtfully. Though he wasn’t quite smiling, she could see the crinkling around his eyes. Jensen rubbed the back of his neck again. Silence settled between them, as

though it looked like they were both looking for something to say.

“Maybe—”

“I could—”

As she closed her mouth, he chuckled. They glanced at each other, grinning sheepishly. Samantha swallowed and motioned to him. “Please, speak. What is it you were going to say?”

He smiled at her. “I was only going to say that maybe you need some assistance and I could... I could stay here? If you needed some help, that is. There’s always work on a ranch, after all. I’m sure it could wait until tomorrow.”

Samantha felt a soft fluttering in her heart as she considered his offer. Nodding slowly, she glanced around at the kitchen. She supposed she could use the help in lifting the large pots and lighting the fire. Biting her lip, she smiled up at Jensen.



“That would be very helpful,” Samantha tried not to sound too eager. “Thank you. There’s a lot that... that I need to finish.”

He nodded. “Then let’s get to work, shall we?”

“Let’s,” she repeated carefully, not certain if her tongue was going to work for the rest of the afternoon.





# Chapter Sixteen

For the first time in a long time, Jensen was reluctant about leaving the house in the morning. He didn't want to stray too far – not when Samantha was so close.

“There you are.” Paula peeked her head out the door as he stood on the porch. Fiddling with his hat, he glanced out to the barns where he needed to prepare his horse. And then he turned back to his mother. “I was wondering if you'd left yet.”

His eyes flitted back to the house behind her, wondering if Samantha was nearby. “No. Not yet, anyway. Why? Do you need something?”

She watched him thoughtfully. He could see in her eyes that she was studying him. A mother always knew. It was something she said a lot. Jensen took a deep breath and wondered what she could know if he hardly even knew anything.

Jensen knew he was acting foolish, and he knew he needed to work harder to make up for his lost time from the previous afternoon. He knew he was still engaged to a woman he didn't understand, and he knew that there was another woman in the house that he liked to talk with. But that was all he knew.

What could his mother possibly know?

"Is there something you want to talk about?" Paula asked, drawing the words out slowly. "It looks like something is on your mind, lately."

She was a mind reader. It was the only explanation. Shaking his head, Jensen put his hat on. If he spent too much time with her now, she would find out everything. He couldn't prove that, but he could feel it in his chest, just as he knew she had been the one to leave warm milk by his bed when the storms had given him nightmares in his childhood.

Shrugging, he took a step towards the stairs. He wasn't avoiding her, he told himself. He just knew there was work to be done. It

was time to start moving. That morning. “No. No, nothing’s on my mind. Everything is going well. I should... I should go. There’s a lot of work to be doing right now.”

“There is.” She nodded slowly. “There’s a lot of work for everyone. You’re going to work in fields today? Not in the barn?”

His heart thumped. “No,” he replied. “Not the barn. I should be in the fields. Away from the house.”

His mother grinned. “Oh, really? Away from the house? Are you trying to say you don’t like being around me anymore?”

“Of course not.” He shook his head hurriedly. “No! I’m just... I should...” Taking a step down on the stairs, his eyes flitted towards the curtains. He could have sworn they moved. Then, he glanced back to his mother, who was still smirking. She definitely knew something.

His idea of staying near the house was

ruined. He realized that now. It almost felt like he had just played a game with his mother – and if they had, she had clearly won. Jensen took another step down the stairs as he gulped in a breath.

She laughed as he descended the final stair. “Make sure you all stop by for your midday meal. We wouldn’t want you to grow too hungry. Or lonely!”

The door was shut before he could respond. Not that Jensen knew how to respond. Rubbing his neck, he forced himself to turn towards the barn. He ransacked his mind for ideas of what his mother had been laughing about, but he wasn’t sure what it could be. She didn’t always make sense. But at the end of the day, she was right about everything.

He just didn’t know what it could be about this time.

Trying to shrug it off, Jensen made his way over to the barns. It had been a nice night, so he’d left Dog in the pen to have some

more legroom. The horse was munching on leftover oats but paused when the gate opened.

“Good morning,” Jensen told him. “Are you ready to get started? We’ve got some branding to take care of before the day is over.”

The horse only huffed lightly into the basket he was eating out of. Jensen gave him another minute before tugging the horse towards his saddle and gear. Mitchell and his father would be along soon enough; they were usually a few minutes behind him, never having enjoyed being awake during the sunrise.

Even then, the pink streaks in the sky were waving to them. It was like the world was excited to start the day. He couldn’t help but grin in response as he turned to his horse. Dog wasn’t too eager to start moving either, but that was helped along with a few sugar cubes. Soon they were headed down the path to find the calves that needed to be branded.



It took him an hour to corral half the younger cows behind the fence. He was locking it behind the last one and preparing to turn back when he heard a familiar whistle. Before he turned around, he already knew his brother was riding down the lane, probably standing up or sitting backwards.

Sure enough, Mitchell was whistling as he waved both arms in the air. His silly tricks pulled Jensen from his distracted thoughts as he grinned and waved.

Their father followed closely behind with the Harrison twins. The Harrisons were their neighbors to the north, settled at the base of the mountains. They handled herds of sheep and, having five healthy sons, often had a few extra hands to spare if anyone needed to borrow one.

“Good morning.” Richard, the older of the twins, nodded to Jensen. “Your pa says you’ve been working slow lately, so we’ve come to pick up the heavy load.”

Mitchell snickered as Jensen’s eyes

widened. "What?"

As his father reached them, the man shook his head. "That wasn't me. That was your brother. But he's got a point. You've had your head in the clouds lately. Why, you haven't even started the fire yet. Last year, you were halfway done before the sun reached the mountains."

Glancing up towards the far-off mountain range, Jensen hesitated. They might have had a small point. His eyes drifted back down to the animals he had corralled so far, and he realized he was indeed moving slower than usual.

"Ah." He offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry about that," he said to his father and shrugged to the younger men. "I guess it happens."

The younger Harrison, Paul, galloped up on his horse, riding without a bridle. He was similar to Mitchell in that he liked to pull silly stunts and he was known in the county for being able to ride any creature within

minutes. "I hear it only happens when there's a girl on the mind. We were wondering when you were going to take one in those skinny arms of yours."

Jensen laughed the joke off. "I can still wrestle you down to the ground any day, Paul. Just you ask for it."

The others laughed as well. "So, who's the girl?" Richard asked as he slid off his horse. Tipping his hat, he raised an eyebrow to Jensen. "Are we sure she's real?"

"Of course she is," Jensen scoffed. "Real as the calves waiting for you here."

"Is she pretty?" Paul pressed with a grin. "She might be too pretty for you. Mitchell and Paul are taken, but I'm not. Are you sure she might not prefer a more handsome man?"

Mitchell tied his horse and his father's, and then joined them at the small fire pit. Jensen was still fixing an old wire on the post and the Harrisons were working to build up

the flames for the branding irons. Keeping an eye on them at the same time, Angus checked on the rest of the cows.

Before Jensen could answer Paul, Mitchell spoke up. “She’s mighty fine. But it’s looking like Jensen might have two ladies on his hands now. We have a visitor. Pretty little lady. You should see him at supper, making moon eyes at her.”

Jensen froze, staring at his brother in surprise.

Inwardly, he began to panic. He thought he had been more careful. He wasn’t staring at her constantly, was he? Jensen tried to think back to his behavior around Samantha. Had he been drooling after her? He wasn’t certain. His mouth went dry as he glanced at his father, hoping the man hadn’t heard.

“I don’t think I...” he trailed off, but the Harrison twins were already laughing.

“Two?” Paul repeated with a grin.

“Jensen, you’re a good guy. Why aren’t you sharing?”

His brother elbowed him. “Last we saw, you didn’t have anyone. Now there’s one on each arm! I’m not sure that’s fair. How’d you manage that?”

Mitchell snickered as he tossed some sticks into the fire. He threw one to Jensen, who caught it easily. “Boys, quiet now. I think you’re embarrassing him.”

“No, I’m not,” Jensen started, but his tone was more hesitant than he meant it to be.

It made the boys laugh even more. “Look at him! He’s like a kid who wound up with more than he could handle. Why, I think maybe two girls are too much for him. Say, what’s so good about this second girl? She just up at the house?”

That question was answered by a nod from Mitchell. “Sure is. I think she’s sticking around longer in hopes of earning a kiss from

our man Jensen here.”

“She must be a cute one.” Paul chuckled. “If she’s that desperate, I’m sure I could help a lady out.”

Tightening his grip on the iron, Jensen frowned at that joke. But he didn’t know what to say about it. His mouth was still dry as the twins tossed a few more jokes about what Samantha must be like.

He cleared his throat, not sure if he liked them talking about her. “Let’s focus on work,” he managed in a more forceful tone. “We can joke later.”

Mitchell hesitated and then glanced up. “Pa’s coming back around. I guess you’re right about the work.”

The twins exchanged a look and then nodded. The playful mood between them softened as they straightened up and started over to the cow pen. Jensen sat there tensely for a minute, waiting for a final jab, but it

never came.

Eventually, relief flooded through his shoulders and he was able to concentrate on the task at hand.

And yet he couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. They were light-hearted jokes, and he knew they all meant well. The Harrisons would never dream of hurting someone. And Mitchell always looked for a way to get a laugh.

But they had brought Samantha into the fold, and Jensen didn't like that. He felt protective of her. After everything she had been through, she deserved better: She deserved happiness and hope and a good life. He couldn't explain it to himself or anyone else, but there was something about that Samantha Loche.

She was a brave woman who had endured something terrible. There was a sense of quiet courage within her, hidden behind her beauty. But her strength was clear to see, and he could see the hope in her eyes for the future, too.

Samantha was a lovely woman inside and out.

A remarkable woman. He had never met anyone like her. Jensen wondered if that was why he couldn't stop thinking about her. His thoughts wandered, going back to their conversation as they'd walked around the house. It wasn't the first time he'd taken a walk on the property with a woman. But it was the first one he had enjoyed.

Caroline was a nice enough girl. But there was something about Samantha that Jensen couldn't get out of his mind. He wanted more than anything to discover what it was about her that drove him crazy.

As they got to work on branding the calves, Jensen tried to think. He needed to talk to Samantha again. He wanted to take her for another walk, or perhaps a ride. Something, he decided, that would make her smile.

For the rest of the day, Jensen considered his options. He had to find a way to talk with her again.







# Chapter Seventeen

Samantha stood on the steps of the ranch house, looking out into the valley.

The view left her breathless every time she gazed off into the wilderness. The land went on forever before her, reaching far. There was simply so much of it that she felt she might grow overwhelmed if she thought too hard about the view.

So, she tried not to think. Instead, she took in a deep breath.

Her eyes lifted slightly to see the slope of the roof still towering over her. The house was large, as well. She couldn't remember ever thinking it might be dwarfed by the surrounding property. It fit in nicely with the lay of the land.

Two stories tall, with a small attic sitting on the very top, the house was made of a dark cherry wood with stone corners and shutters

painted white around the windows. Paula Reaves had told Samantha how she had argued with her husband about how many windows they would have. He didn't want too many, but she wanted more. They had eventually found a number that worked for both of them.

Perhaps, Samantha pondered, the ranch felt so big because it was overflowing with love and dedication. It was clear to see every moment that the Reaves family cared deeply for their ranch. The land wasn't just land to be worked to them – it was their purpose in life to make it better.

And she was learning to do the same. Though the responsibilities she had taken on with Paula's help were small with few effects, Samantha put all her effort into the tasks. She took great care to complete them correctly, spending more time on small duties instead of rushing her way through them. It sometimes meant more labor. But there was something about doing her work right instead of simply done that made her feel satisfied.

“Samantha?”

Opening her eyes, she turned around to see Paula peeking around the door at her.

Heat spread across her cheeks. She had been standing out here soaking up the sunlight longer than she intended. “Yes? I’m sorry, I’m coming. I didn’t mean to wander.” She grabbed her skirts and hurried to the door.

Paula chuckled as she backed up and let the girl inside. “There’s no need to rush. I simply wanted to let you know that I found another dress of mine you could use. I’ve set it on your bed, if you’d like to try it on? We might need to fix a hem or two, but I thought we might as well give it a try.”

“Oh, I couldn’t take anything more from you,” Samantha protested, her hands pressing over her heart. “Paula, I told you. You’ve done too much.”

But the woman was waving a hand as though to swat the words away. “Just try it

on. It needs to be worn by someone. Go on. Put it on and let me see how it fits you. I'll be chopping the broccoli."

Samantha knew she wouldn't win, and she didn't mind. Though Samantha didn't want to take advantage of the woman's kindness, she knew Paula loved more than anything to spoil the people she cared for. It was difficult for Samantha to adjust to, since they hardly knew each other, but she'd felt a kinship with the woman since she had first stepped inside the house. If the woman wanted something, Samantha was going to let her have it.

Even if it meant that she was the one to receive a gift.

Shaking her head, she made her way to the room and wondered where Paula had found it. Why Paula didn't want it anymore. Whatever it was, Samantha knew it was going to be in decent condition, just like Paula kept everything in her home.

But she couldn't have expected anything as nice as what she found waiting on the bed

before her. Samantha's mouth dropped open at the lovely dress carefully displayed for her benefit. It took her a minute to gather the courage to feel the soft cotton and lace on the short sleeves. There was a fairly large flouncy skirt and a bodice covered in flowers on one side and buttons on the other. The skirt had pretty ruffles, and the soft blues of the dress reminded her of a robin's egg.

It was prettier than anything she had ever seen. While she could wear it around the house, Samantha knew she certainly couldn't wear it while working in the garden or washing the laundry. Perhaps a Sunday dress, she supposed, as she fingered the delicate stitching.

The more she touched it, the more Samantha wanted to try it on. Soon, the urge was too much and she quickly switched outfits. The buttoning was complicated, but with the short sleeves and the low neck of the overall dress, she was able to finish it herself within just a few minutes. And, as though Paula had known, the dress fit Samantha perfectly.

After a moment's thought, she tugged at her hair and pulled apart the braid she had put it in earlier that morning. It waved down her shoulders and to her lower back. Brushed and fine, her hair presented a fine contrast.

Though the gown wasn't as wide as a fine lady's gown, it was finer than anything Samantha had ever owned. Anything this nice that she might have touched would have been something that she would have helped to sell in her parents' general store.

"This is crazy," she said out loud to no one in particular.

And she spun in a small circle, watching the ruffles stretch out like angel wings. Samantha couldn't help but smile as she stepped out the door to go find Paula. She could already picture the woman smiling wide, clapping her hands and clasping them under her chin.

Before she took two more steps, however, she reached the end of the hallway to the next one that led to the back door. It was opened.



Jensen had his back to her as he closed it. Samantha couldn't help but stop.

A small voice in her head told her to step back and hide in the hall.

Then, another part of her said no. She wanted him to see her. It sent a little thrill down her spine at the idea of him smiling at her again. Jensen was a handsome young man, and she couldn't resist the idea of looking all dressed up before him. Samantha wouldn't call that pride, of course, but perhaps a little foolish hope.

He turned around, even as her boldness faded away. Jensen's lips parted almost imperceptibly. The hand on his belt dropped as his eyebrows raised. "Oh." He made a small sound, like he was trying to say something but forgot how to use his tongue.

Samantha felt a blush rising to her cheeks. But somehow she found the courage to take a step forward. She felt strengthened with his eyes on her, as though she could do anything. A smile reached her face as she came out of

the shadows and passed an open window.

“Hello, Jensen,” she offered. “How are you?”

He took a step forward. “Well. And you?”

She copied and took another step in his direction. Every time she did, he followed in the same manner until they were only a foot apart.

“I’m very well,” Samantha informed him with a slight nod. She couldn’t help herself from teasing him lightly by fluttering her eyelashes. There were no words for what had overcome her in the moment, but somehow, she knew he couldn’t stop staring at her. And she didn’t want him to.

A grin slowly spread across his lips. “Good. I’m glad.”

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

She studied his eyes curiously, wondering if they could really be that blue. More than anything, she wanted to brush his blonde hair from his eyes so she could have a better look. But Samantha couldn't find the strength in her arms to move anymore. She was stuck.

Her heart pounded, though she couldn't stop smiling. There was something about Jensen that drew her to him. It felt like the air between them buzzed like honeybees.

"What are you doing up here?" she mustered the courage to ask after a moment of silence.

"Food." Jensen inhaled slowly and then exhaled even slower. "The Harrisons are helping us today and... and we want to finish the work by sunset. I promised to bring them a noonday meal."

She nodded, knowing how they cared for their work. "That's very kind of you."

He licked his lips. "And you? What are... what are you up to today?"

Her hands hung limp by her side, touching the soft fabric. Samantha could feel her heartbeat in her ears, the only sound apart from their voices. It was as if the world had gone silent. Like nothing else existed but them. Her head swam and she couldn't help but enjoy the moment.

"I'll be preparing supper shortly."

"Oh. Good." Jensen cleared his throat again. "That's good."

She felt her heart skip a beat. "Yes. Good. We have the rest of the week planned. Even Sunday," she added after a moment, as a thought came to mind. Samantha would say anything just to have another moment with Jensen. It was hard to find the words, but she didn't want it to end, so she tried to look for ways to keep him there beside her. "There will be guests on Sunday for supper, Paula said. But I don't know their names. Do you know them?"

Yet her hopes of keeping the moment alive died as Jensen paused and began to frown. His gaze finally left hers. “Right. Caroline.”

Without his eyes on her, the spell began to break. She had ruined everything. Samantha could feel her heart thumping. She grew lightheaded and steeled herself to keep standing.

Samantha swallowed. “Caroline? Is that... is that family?”

Jensen took a step back. A brush of cold air ran across her spine and she shivered. “No. It’s actually my fiancée. And her parents, they come with her,” he added, his voice growing stiffer with every word.

He wasn’t looking at her anymore, and that was probably a good thing.

She wasn’t certain what her face looked like in that moment. She was so surprised, that for a minute she didn’t know what to say. Her

mouth hung open, gaping as she tried to think.

“Oh, I didn’t... that’s... wonderful.” The word came out more reluctantly than she had meant.

“Right.” He cleared his throat once more. But now it was no longer as charming. A weight dropped on her chest and the silly hope inside her faded away. “I’m due to be married in two months. There’s still a lot to prepare for the wedding, you see.”

A wedding. The idea hit her so strong that she couldn’t breathe. Samantha stepped back and touched the wall. Her legs could hardly hold her up, they were shaking so badly. Her head swam and she felt herself beginning to fall apart. What had happened to her?

She tried to say something. “Ah.”

He took another step back. Moments ago, Samantha could hardly believe how close she felt to him, but now, she realized that had to have been a dream. An entire world divided

them. There was pain and strangers and different lives keeping them apart.

After what she had just been through, it wasn't like she had time or the attention for a handsome young man. Whatever Samantha had been thinking or feeling must have been a lie. Or something like it. Nothing could happen between them, after all. She had her history, and he had his home.

As her mind reeled, Samantha could hardly believe herself. What was she doing, dressing up in other people's clothes and playing games with handsome men? This wasn't the life she was supposed to have.

She was being as foolish as she was being selfish. Horrified at her own actions, Samantha covered her mouth with her hands. Her parents would be so ashamed of her. She didn't deserve Jensen, just like she didn't deserve happiness.

After all, she was alone, and her parents were gone. They had died saving her – and this was how she was repaying them.

Samantha felt her strength lapse as an overwhelming sense of guilt suddenly sunk into her bones. Again, she was hit hard with the memory of those flames. This time, so hard that she leaned back against the wall, struggling not to let her wobbly knees drop her to the ground. She wrapped her arms around herself in disbelief of her earlier thoughts.

A gasp escaped her lips.

“Samantha?”

She had no right to feel disappointed by Jensen’s upcoming wedding, or even feel that kind of hope or happiness around someone like him. Not when her parents had died only a week ago. It was like she had forgotten all about them.

Samantha closed her eyes and tried to hold back the tears. She was so foolish. A straight fool, with nothing but a pounding heart telling her all the wrong things. She



could hardly believe herself. And she hated herself for it.

“Samantha?” Jensen hovered over her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” she choked out. But her voice cracked as she said, “I’m fine. Really, I’m all right.” Before the words were out, tears streamed down her face and between her fingers. Samantha couldn’t help herself as she felt her heart breaking all over again.





# Chapter Eighteen

The young lady needed a treat.

Paula had decided that when she'd woken up that morning. Samantha needed something more to cheer her up. And perhaps in turn, she hoped, it might cheer up Jensen, too. Though she assured herself it meant nothing and that it wasn't a plan, she had looked through one of her old chests.

She tried not to hold onto too many things, but there was one dress Paula had refused to give up. It was a lovely blue gown, lightweight and soft and comfortable, that she'd had specially made when Angus had money to spare for the first time in their marriage.

Mitchell had just been born and Angus had told her to treat herself to a new dress. She could have whatever she wanted, he had told her, just write it on the family tab. It had taken her weeks to build up the courage to do such a thing. But eventually, she'd trekked

into Baker's Creek and had the fine gown made.

It was lovely, and Paula had cherished it. There had been five occasions for her to wear the dress. Two weddings, two town parties, and one summer picnic. But on the last occasion, Mitchell had ripped the hem and she'd decided it had to be retired. The gown was lovely, but she needed more practical clothes while raising two boys. She had fixed the rip and then set it aside for another day.

Now, she still adored the dress, but after pulling it out of the chest, Paula had known immediately that Samantha had to try it on. There was no need for her to do it now, knowing she wouldn't quite fit it like she once had. She'd spent the other night letting out the hem a couple of inches, since the girl was taller than herself.

And then she had turned it over to Samantha for an afternoon surprise.

As Paula chopped the broccoli, she hummed. It was a beautiful day, and a breeze

drifted through one window and out the other. Angus had a few ideas about how the kitchen should be set up when they started to build. But then she had reminded him that it would be her place to work, so it was her decision.

Of course, he had eventually realized her ideas were best. That was usually how it happened. Just thinking of her husband made her smile. He was a charming man, a hard worker, and a good provider. She was just saying a short prayer that he would be pleased by her recipe when she thought she heard something in the hall.

Paula paused with the knife in the air and turned her head.

She thought she could hear voices speaking low. After a moment of straining, she set the knife down and wiping her hands, took two steps toward the hall. She didn't want to interrupt a conversation, only to know who was speaking.

Samantha was there, she could hear the girl's soft voice. And Jensen.

The two of them were drawn to each other, though they didn't seem to understand that. She smiled again, thinking of how the pair often took over the conversations during supper. Paula knew she shouldn't protect the two young adults, but the light in their eyes when they were together was too bright for her to consider dimming it.

She was about to turn back to the vegetables when she heard an audible gasp. Paula had been a mother long enough to know it wasn't a good sound. Still holding the towel in her hands, she furrowed her brow and hastened over to see what was going on.

"What happened?" Paula asked in disbelief when she stopped.

The dress fit Samantha perfectly. And, just as she had hoped, the color did wonders for the girl's pale skin, especially with the dark hair that hung loose down her back. She would be a sight to behold, if she didn't have her hands pressed to her face as she sobbed.

Turning to her eldest, Paula wondered what Jensen had done to cause such a commotion.

But he appeared to be wondering the very same thing. His face was open in concern and panic, one hand stretched out to Samantha but not quite touching her. After a minute, he slid his gaze over to his mother.

“What happened?” she asked, wrapping her arms around Samantha. “Jensen, did you say something?”

He rubbed the back of his neck and took a step back. His brow furrowed, reminding her of when he had been a young boy and thought he was lost off the trail when he turned in the wrong direction. “I don’t... I don’t know. I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

Giving her son a frown, Paula shook her head. He was a good boy, but no one was perfect. Samantha was still a fragile young woman after everything she had overcome. “You need to be more careful, Jensen. And what are you doing in the house? You’re



supposed to be branding the calves.”

Jensen made a face. “I know. I know! I only came up here for... but I didn’t think I... Samantha? I’m sorry, I don’t know what I...”

“Dear?” Paula cut through her son’s awkward apology to try and look at Samantha.

But the girl didn’t want to show her face. Between her sobs and hiccups, she gasped for breath. If she didn’t catch herself soon, Paula knew, she was bound to pass out. She thought fast as she held the poor girl close to her chest.

First things first, Paula told herself. “Get back to work,” she instructed Jensen. He had done enough damage. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Are you certain there isn’t anything I can do?” he tried.

Jensen was a considerate young man who was always looking to help. Paula was glad she had raised him fairly well. Only, sometimes, there wasn’t anything he could do.

Paula shook her head. “Back to work, Jensen. I’ve got it.”

He looked at her reluctantly, so she gave him a stern look and jerked her head back towards the door. As the good son he was, he turned away.

That allowed her to shift her attention back to the young woman struggling for breath in her arms. Her heart went out to the poor girl as she realized she might have made a mistake. That, or her attempt to cheer the girl up had gone terribly wrong. Something had happened in the mere minutes the two women were separated. She didn’t know what it was, but Paula was determined to find out.

“Come along,” she decided at last. “Let’s take you back to your room, shall we? Right this way.”

Samantha’s weeping continued as Paula turned the young woman back in the direction of her room. Though she could hear the girl

opening her mouth to speak, it was swept away in a flood of hiccups and soft sobs.

They slowly made their way down the hall, the younger woman clinging to Paula and hardly able to see straight, let alone stand. Paula felt the sleeves of her dress growing damp, but she didn't mind. Her heart broke for Samantha, for she hadn't heard tears like that for a very long time.

But, hopefully, there was hope.

"Here we are," Paula assured her as they reached the bedroom.

The girl stood stiffly but, with a little nudging, Samantha sat on the edge of the bed. Keeping her arms wrapped around the young lady, Paula began to rock her slowly back and forth, pulling the girl's head under her chin.

Samantha folded into her and tried to say something. "I di- an' try bo'," was all Paula could gather.

“Hush,” Paula tried to soothe her. “What’s wrong? We’re alone now, you can talk.”

This time, when she tried again, all that was understandable through the damp despair was the word “mother.” There were no other details needed for Paula to understand.

Closing her eyes, she tried to think. In the past, most of the tears shed in the house had been her own. Though her sons had experienced falls and scraped knees, she’d never seen Angus shed a single tear.

When she had lost her daughter, Paula remembered crying for a week straight. And for the two years that followed, there were moments where she simply fell apart into tears. Even now, there were days where the pain returned and felt as fresh as it had that first day.

Samantha had just lost both of her parents. In Kansas, people held close to their loved ones. One never knew what the next day or what the next storm might bring.

Though Samantha attempted a few more times to explain herself, Paula decided to stop prying. Eventually, the young girl would gather her breath again and run out of tears. But she needed to have a good cry, it seemed, and Paula was willing to help. She cradled Samantha quietly in her arms and offered soothing noises until soon, there was only sniffing.

Paula was brushing her hands through Samantha's hair as the girl's head rested on her lap when silence finally settled between them. The younger woman blinked frequently, her eyes red and swollen. She licked her cracked lips but didn't say anything for several minutes.

An hour or two had passed by that point. Though supper needed to be prepared, Paula wouldn't dream of leaving Samantha to deal with this burden alone. She sat and waited, doing what she could to provide support.

"I'm sorry," Samantha's voice wavered in the quiet. "I didn't mean to... to fall apart."

Paula continued brushing her fingers through the girl's hair. "We all need a good cry some days," she assured her softly.

"Jensen didn't say anything wrong." Samantha swallowed noisily as she closed her eyes. "He was nice. Very nice. Only I... I started thinking about my parents and—" Her voice cracked.

"And they would be proud of you," Paula finished for her gently, tracing a finger across the girl's tender cheek. "They are proud of you, wherever they are. Your mother and father would want the best for you. And they know you're trying your hardest. It's fine to have days where everything is a little bit harder. It doesn't mean you're weak. It just means you keep trying."

Samantha thought about that for a minute and then sat up. Paula moved her hands away, waiting as the girl stretched and then nodded. "I am trying. I think."

Offering her a smile, Paula stood. "You are. I can see it in you, Samantha. Now that you're out of tears, we need to find some water for you. Keeping your fingers busy will help you focus and will help me finish supper. Let's take you back in the kitchen and get back to work. We can talk as we get the meal ready. Come along, then."

Samantha took another moment to compose herself, rubbing her cheeks before changing out of the fancy dress. Then she met Paula in the hallway, and the two of them returned to the kitchen. They moved about quietly, but the tears were over and soon, Samantha was smiling again.

Though she wished there was more she could do, Paula knew she wasn't the girl's family, and she couldn't do anything if the girl wouldn't open up to her. Hopefully, Samantha would learn to trust her, she supposed, so she could help the young woman heal.







# Chapter Nineteen

Jensen stepped outside, but he didn't return to the other men just yet.

Instead, he paced on the porch, white-knuckling his hat and staring down at his boots as he tried to think it through. What had he done wrong? He'd said something that had hurt her, obviously. But for the life of him, he'd already forgotten what they were talking about just as Samantha covered her face and started to cry.

He hated to think that he might have done something to upset her. Fiddling with his hat, Jensen scowled. He was always making mistakes. He couldn't involve Caroline in a casual conversation, and he had made Samantha cry. Maybe he just wasn't the kind of man who could be married, at the end of the day. Not if everything he did continued to upset women.

Though he had wanted to explain to his mother what had happened, his tongue had

been all tied up. Everything inside of him had begun to shut down. And he hated it. He hated just standing there, watching the young woman cry.

She didn't deserve to cry. She deserved to be happy, to have good things happen to her. He should have done something about that, but in the moment, he'd been too bewildered.

He kicked the closest post in frustration after realizing he should have at least tried to pat her shoulders. Or her head. Something like that. He should have done something more than just standing there like he had, looking like an idiot.

For a second, he thought about heading back out to the men. But then he remembered the food; he was supposed to bring back something for everyone to eat.

Jensen hesitated on the porch before grudgingly returning to the door. This time, he opened it slowly and carefully, wondering if he would find either of the ladies nearby. He hoped Samantha was finished crying. He

didn't like the idea of her being sad.

But he didn't see anyone in the hallway. There wasn't anyone in the kitchen when he stopped there, either. After glancing around at their goods, he settled for some apples and bread. Jensen took his time in preparing the basket. Though he wasn't certain what he was waiting for, his heart pattered at the idea of finding Samantha coming out to see him again.

She had looked awful pretty. The beautiful dress made her eyes sparkle.

Of course, Samantha always looked pretty. But that dress had taken his breath away. Her waist had looked so small, like he could just wrap his arms around her. And her hips and chest had curved beautifully with the folds of the lace.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat and shook his head. There was work to get done. He didn't have time to daydream. So, Jensen let out an annoyed sigh and started back out the door.

When he made it to the first step, he hesitated one more time.

Looking over his shoulder, Jensen prayed that Samantha was all right. And he prayed that his mother knew what to do. He would have to ask her at a later time about how he should react if he ever experienced something like that again. There weren't a lot of tears shed at his house on a normal occasion, after all, but if he was going to be a man with his own family, Jensen decided he should probably be aware of how to take care of such a situation.

Still, his thoughts lingered on Samantha.

His heart skipped a beat at the thought of her teary-eyed face. All he had wanted to do was wrap her in his arms and shield her from the cruel world. But that nagging voice in the back of his mind told him that it wasn't his place to do such a thing: to take her in his arms was an intimate gesture, one they weren't meant to have together.

Even his hands had itched at the idea of brushing away those tears. They had slipped off her nose and down her cheeks, soaking the top of her dress and collecting in a pool at their feet. His chest had ached at the sight as he realized how helpless he was in the moment.

But now that she was out of view and he was outside, Jensen wondered why he'd felt so compelled to act in that way. Why did he care for her like that? They were still strangers, really. He ran his tongue over his chapped lips as he stared at the door.

“Maybe I’m going crazy,” he sighed at last.

He had wasted enough time. There was still work to be done and there were hungry men waiting on him. Jensen forced himself to turn back to the trail and headed back down the hill to the other men, taking the food. There were a few more hours of work to do before the sun went down. He spent much of that time thinking about Samantha, wondering about her. The hard work was usually a good distraction, but for once, it did nothing to pull

her from his mind.

Even as they rejoined the ladies at supper, Jensen couldn't help but study her during the evening prayer.

“Amen,” everyone chimed in afterward.

He blinked and glanced down at his place for a second. When he looked up again, Samantha had turned to him.

The young lady looked fresh again, dressed in her usual skirt and blouse, and her hair was pinned back up. He was disappointed, even as he realized it allowed him to see her face better than it would otherwise. While her eyes still looked a little red and puffy, she had clearly had some time to recover and was mostly back to her quiet, cheerful self.

“Everything went well,” he replied vaguely when his mother asked how their day had gone with the cows.

When he turned back to Samantha, she wasn't looking at him.

His father talked, going into detail about the hard work and the help they had received from their neighbors. But Jensen hardly paid attention. There was food on his plate, and he remembered to move his fork around. But he wasn't eating anything.

"Today was a good day," his mother assured her husband when he asked about her day. Though she detailed a story about the chickens, she didn't mention anything about Samantha.

It was Mitchell who brought her to the light. "And Samantha? Did you lose a chicken, as well?" he asked lightly.

The young lady looked up from her food, and her cheeks flushed. "No," she assured him. "I was fortunate not to lose anything today. And yourself? Did you lose a chicken, or perhaps a cow?" There was a small smile tugging at her lips.



Jensen felt something churning in his stomach. He wanted to be the one making her smile. Glancing over at his brother sitting beside him, he wondered what Mitchell would say.

“No, but I almost lost a few fingers,” his brother said. “That’s a good story. You’ll laugh, don’t worry.” And he dove into a story that made everyone chuckle – except for their mother, who decided that there would be no such conversation at the supper table ever again, nor did she want to hear about her family taking such needless risks.

“It was only a joke,” Mitchell reminded her.

She shook her head. “I won’t have it. Never again do I want to hear of you doing something so foolish.” Then she shot their father a look, but he just muttered under his breath and focused on his carrots. Jensen watched his mother sigh before turning back to her own food, as well.

As silence settled over them at the table, he glanced over at Samantha again. She wasn't eating very much. She probably had a lot on her mind. Jensen opened his mouth to ask her, but realized it wasn't the time. Besides, he didn't want to have to share her with the rest of his family.

"At least it will be a cool evening," Jensen prompted. "Will you be reading again for the evening, Mother?"

Once she had taken a drink of water, Paula nodded. "I believe so. Will you be joining me?"

Jensen glanced at his brother and father, who both gave half-hearted shrugs. Then he shot a careful glance over at Samantha, who was attempting to cut a particular piece of meat. It wasn't obeying, and he saw the crease in her brow as she concentrated. "Perhaps so," he said. "Though I think I'll want to take a walk tonight. The stars should be out."

"That sounds nice," his mother offered. "Will you be wanting company?"

He kept watching Samantha, waiting breathlessly for her to notice him. Finally, she looked up, her eyes softening. Jensen raised an eyebrow, as though pointedly directing the question to her. He hoped she would say yes.

Then she quirked her lips. There was a short nod and then she ducked her head down. His heart pounded.

The entire exchange had happened within two seconds before he turned back to his mother and shrugged. "It'll be late, I'm sure. I wouldn't want to bother you."

For the rest of their meal, Jensen tried to decide how he would go about it. After all, he didn't want anyone else to join him on an evening stroll with Samantha. He didn't want anyone else to even know about it. Not because he was ashamed, but because he knew it could be seen as improper. And he didn't want to do such a thing to Samantha and her reputation.

He had decided that afternoon that she at least needed a friend, and he could be that person for her. Someone needed to be there for her, and not just Paula acting as a mother to Samantha. The young lady needed someone else. And he felt a need, himself, to get to know her better.

So, Jensen ate quietly, forcing himself to finish part of what was on his plate before deciding to call it done for the evening. There was too much going on in his stomach for him to want to finish his food. Eventually, he even tucked his hands beneath the table because he was fidgeting so much.

Relief flooded through his body when everyone was finished eating. He stood up immediately, grinning sheepishly at his parents' curious looks, and started clearing the table. Jensen could feel the anxious energy tumbling around in his body--he needed to do something about it. He helped clean up and put away the rest of the food before washing his hands and joining his parents in the parlor.

Mitchell left to see his girl, leaving the rest

of them to gather around for a book. Paula had liked to read aloud a couple of nights a week for as long as Jensen could remember. Her voice was calming and sweet. Even as she read through *The Tempest*, Jensen found a small lull of peace settling over his shoulders.

After two scenes, however, Jensen couldn't take it anymore. He nodded subtly – or at least he hoped it was subtly – to Samantha as he stood up to stand and stretch. “I'm going to take that walk now,” he announced. “Thank you for reading, Mother. You'll have to tell me in the morning what I miss.”

Yawning, she shook her head at him. “There's no need. I'm rather put out myself.” She offered her husband a small smile. “And you, dear?”

The large man stood and offered a hand to his wife. “To bed we go. You're looking careworn. We can read another night.”

Samantha stood, her eyes darting between Jensen and his parents. The blanket she had

been keeping herself warm under was politely folded and set back on the nearby shelf. "I'll be in my room, then, for the night," she announced, shooting Jensen a look right after she spoke. "Rest well, Paula."

"And you." Paula glanced back with a warm smile. "Good night, everyone."

"To bed," Angus announced, though to who in particular, Jensen did not know.

Not wanting to look too suspect, he grabbed his jacket and headed out the back door. There was a lantern hanging above the porch that he picked up. Jensen decided he had best let Samantha have a few minutes to herself, and then he would go to her window. Since her room was close to his parents', he didn't want to risk being inside and going to her door.

Biding his time, Jensen kicked pebbles on the path around the house and wondered what he was doing. He didn't even know yet what he wanted to say to Samantha. If she even came out to join him. For all he knew, he was

imagining that she had understood what he  
had never said.







# Chapter Twenty

Samantha closed the door to her bedroom, trying not to make a sound.

She hardly breathed as she closed her eyes. Though she knew she was being foolish, she couldn't help herself. A flush was already creeping up her neck and into her cheeks. Her hands shook lightly even as she pressed them hard against the door.

Paula took soft small steps compared to Mr. Reaves' loud thudding steps. Their door creaked as they opened it, stepped through, and then closed it behind them. There were muffled voices spoken low as the night set in. Samantha couldn't hear anything intelligibly, however, and she prayed they couldn't hear the manic drumming of her heart in her chest.

There was no reason to be nervous. At least, that was what she kept telling herself.

Samantha found herself eager to talk with

Jensen again without any distractions. But she was also ashamed of her earlier actions, of tearing up so badly that she could hardly speak. What must he think of her after that? The blush continued to grow.

Picking up a shawl from the dark mahogany chest by the small bed, Samantha wrapped it around her shoulders and began to pace. She would need to apologize for what had happened. But how was she to explain it? Words wouldn't make it better. Besides, he had told her he was getting married.

Samantha stopped short. She bit her lip and wondered why he wanted to talk to her if he was meant to wed another. Then she questioned why she had already been there a week and was only just now learning of the intended marriage. But that wasn't her place to judge.

She started walking again. Shaking her head, Samantha told herself sternly that she would behave and not ask impolite questions, nor would she go into detail about why she had sobbed so terribly. It wasn't his fault, and

she didn't want him to think her weak.

Though perhaps he already does, she realized fretfully.

A short clap against the nearby window caught her by surprise before her thoughts could send her down any other paths. Whirling around, Samantha moved the curtains aside and opened one window to find Jensen standing on the other side with a lantern in hand.

"Hello." He smiled up at her. "Care for a stroll?"

"What, through the window?" She glanced down. "I'm not certain about that." Then she looked towards his parents' bedroom and realized she didn't want to disturb them. Nor did she want Mitchell coming upon them and deciding to join. No, a few minutes alone with Jensen sounded lovely. When she looked back up, her eyes caught on his. They were so blue. She wasn't certain that even the sky on the most beautiful summer day could be so blue.

He might have said something then, but she wasn't sure. The next thing Samantha knew was that he had a hand on her arm and was helping her out the window. When he chuckled in her ear, she couldn't help but giggle. She had never done anything like this before, sneaking around with someone.

Not that they were sneaking around, she told herself. They simply didn't want to disturb anyone.

"Are you on your feet?" he asked, his hand still lingering on her arm.

She patted her skirts before fixing her shawl. Then, Samantha nodded and gave Jensen a shy smile. The stars twinkled above them, lighting up the night sky. But she still hoped it meant he couldn't see the blush on her cheeks.

"Quite well, thank you," she responded politely.

Jensen nodded and then offered his arm. "Then let's walk. It's a beautiful night for a stroll, is it not?"

As she glanced up at the sky, she could have sworn she saw a shooting star. But it was over before she could drop her mouth open in amazement. Samantha smiled at him. "Yes," she said at last. "It really is beautiful. Do you often go walking at this time of night?"

Shrugging, the young man glanced up at the skies. "I used to. There hasn't been a lot of time recently, but yes. The stars change with the season and I used to track them as a child. Perhaps I expected them to tell me something. A secret, or a sign. It sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"No." She shook her head. "It sounds like you're human. We're all looking for signs. Life is... life is hard." Samantha's brow furrowed as she thought back to that afternoon. She couldn't help it. Though she was ashamed for falling apart, she wasn't ashamed of the pain she felt.

Paula was helping her to understand that

idea, that all the emotions she felt as she grieved for her parents were natural and normal. Even if it didn't feel that way. Sometimes, Samantha could swear she was a piece of glass rocking on the edge of a counter, about to break at any moment. It scared her. The very way of life that had forcibly ripped from her hands. She couldn't go back. While she appreciated all that Jensen and his family did for her, it was still something she wasn't used to.

“Life is hard.” Jensen murmured, repeating her words. “But it doesn't have to break us,” he added after a moment. “Or rather, not break us forever. There's always a chance to heal. Like our bones – they can be bruised and broken, but they can come together again.”

The lantern shook in his other hand as he rambled. It made Samantha smile.

There was something about him. She didn't know what it was about Jensen, but whenever she spent time with him, she could feel the world disappear. Something else came

into the mix. The words escaped her every time, but she could feel it. A buzzing in the air, tension sticking between them, the thudding in her heart.

“What are you thinking about?”

Samantha jerked her head up as they came to a stop by the front of the house. When she looked up, she found Jensen cocking his head as he watched her. A lock of his soft blond hair fell across his forehead.

Her fingers itched to move the hair. She was curious to see if it truly was as soft as she imagined. But something prevented her from reaching out, though she couldn't decide if it was her nerves or something else.

She gave him a small smile. “Everything and nothing. I don't want to talk about anything unhappy tonight. Is that all right?”

He gave her a nod. “I like that idea.”

Scrunching up her nose to think of



something they could talk about instead, she blurted out, "Have you ever broken a bone?" He had mentioned it a moment ago, and she didn't know what else to say.

"I wouldn't say that was exactly a happy occasion," Jensen chuckled as he tugged her to start walking again. It was a good thing he did, for her face flushed all over again. "But yes, I have broken my arm. I was eight years old. Mitchell and I were playing games in the old barn. The very one we met in, if you recall."

She opened her mouth just as she realized he was teasing. He gave her a wink and continued his story.

The evening passed them by, twinkling star after twinkling star.

Samantha didn't know how, but she fell into conversation easily with Jensen all over again.

Her anxiety was briefly forgotten, for she

felt at peace beside him. Even when they heard rustlings nearby and the wolves howling at the moon, she wasn't frightened. There was nothing to fear with Jensen Reaves by her side. She trusted him to be a gentleman, to be good, and to be kind.

She couldn't help herself. There was something about him that drew her in. Jensen was light-hearted with his words, kind when she spoke, and always ready to make her smile. He had nothing negative or shameful to say. Even as he spoke of his brother's pranks and father's sternness, love laced his voice.

Eventually, they had strolled around the barns twice. Then they headed up to the house, carefully avoiding the corner where his parents' bedroom windows were located. Speaking softly in the night, they traveled the path. Jensen was always there when she stumbled over a rock or root.

When she yawned for a third time, he guided her to the back door.

"They should be asleep," he whispered on

the porch. "And you should be asleep, too. I must apologize; I didn't mean for us to stay out so long."

She dropped her hand away. "It's all right. I enjoyed this walk. Besides, I'm not even tired." But then her body betrayed her as she suddenly yawned again.

Grinning, Jensen shook his head. "Go ahead and try telling me that in the morning." He blew out the candle, leaving them in darkness.

Samantha inhaled sharply. There was no warning and she tried to adjust her eyes. A familiar hand took her elbow and led her to the door. "Here you are," Jensen murmured beside her. She listened as the door creaked open. "Go ahead. I think I'm going to stay out for a few more minutes."

For a moment, she considered joining him. Then she realized she truly was tired. They must have been outside for at least an hour. When another breeze slipped through her shawl, Samantha knew it was time to retire.

Holding the door open, she paused as she searched for his face in the darkness.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For tonight. I... I enjoyed talking with you.”

“And I,” he responded. Samantha could have sworn he was smiling. “Sleep well, Samantha.”

Not knowing what else to say, she nodded and slipped quietly inside. The door closed slowly behind her as she felt along the walls to make her way down the hall. She was growing familiar with the house and moved slowly, inching her way towards her bedroom. Samantha just hoped she didn't wake anyone.

Finally, she collapsed into her bed. She took a deep breath and rested her hands over her chest for several minutes. Her heart was still beating furiously. Samantha couldn't help herself from letting a wide smile spread across her face.

It had been a lovely night. Though she

hadn't apologized for her tears, she had gathered through their conversation that he accepted what had happened and wouldn't bother her about it. She also felt that he understood enough that neither of them needed to feel awkward. That, in turn, allowed them to think about more cheerful matters.

Like each other. She curled up under the blankets with a happy sigh. Samantha could still feel his arm on hers, and his familiar scent of horses and leather. There was something about Jensen, she knew that she couldn't ignore.





# Chapter Twenty-

## One

Jensen remembered breaking his arm as a young boy and how foolish he had felt for not listening to his mother's warning to be more careful.

That was one of the only punishments he had ever faced, whether brought on by his parents or not. As far back as he could remember, Jensen had always strived to be a good man and an obedient son. It had always been clear that his parents wanted the best for him. They cared about his education, they raised him to respect mankind and trust God, and they wanted him to have a good life.

For as long as he could recall, he had known this. Small rebellions rarely resulted in anything good happening.

Mitchell, though, had a way of making things work for him. While their parents had



tried again and again to reign in the young man, they had never pressed too hard. Jensen couldn't think of many punishments that his brother had received.

No, that was wrong.

There had been several punishments. But few of them had ever worked. Mitchell had either sweet-talked his way out of them, ignored them, or found a way to make the punishment work in his favor.

It had always made Jensen chuckle. Though he had done his best to set a good example for Mitchell, his brother was certainly his own man. At heart, Mitchell was a good person who respected everyone. He just preferred to play around and only listened when he wanted to.

Jensen wondered how it came so naturally to Mitchell to go his own way. It wasn't something Jensen was used to. The incident that had resulted in his broken arm was one of the only instances where he could recall being rebellious. It had been a stern lesson for him,

and he had decided to be better from then on.

But something had changed. He didn't want to do everything that his father wanted him to do, now. Not anymore. While he still cared for the ranch, Jensen wasn't certain he could obey all of his father's wishes.

Something burned within his chest.

The ranch was important. His family was important. But didn't his heart matter, too?

Jensen was having a hard time deciding what to think. There was too much to feel. Every time he got to the point in his thoughts where he worried that he would have to make a hard decision, he recalled Samantha's face.

Her pretty black hair framed her lovely features. Those cheekbones accented her eyes, and that angled jaw of hers pointed out how pretty her smile was when she looked at him. Samantha flooded into his thoughts, and it was difficult for him to think of anything else. Or anyone else.

“Watch out!”

Jensen turned, but it was too late. There was no time to think as a saddle slammed into his shoulder and knocked him off his feet.

He caught himself just in time, scrambling not to fall over while he tried to grab the equipment. It was thick and heavy in his arms, but eventually, he grabbed it by the stirrups. When he looked up, he found their father tossing Mitchell a stern look.

“What?” Mitchell shrugged. “I warned him.”

Jensen scoffed. “As it was already flying through the air.”

“Please.” Mitchell winked. “Your thoughts are miles away. I could have warned you an hour ago and you still wouldn’t have caught it.”

Setting the saddle back on its post, Jensen shook his head. “You don’t need to warn someone an hour early before tossing a saddle at their face. Just before you actually throw it would be helpful.”

“Just because your brother’s daydreaming about his wedding,” their father cut in reasonably, “doesn’t serve you the right to knock him over.”

That made Jensen pause. He hadn’t thought about any wedding for several days. In fact, he had practically forgotten he was going to be wed soon. As he started to roll back his thoughts, Jensen tried to remember when the wedding was to be taking place. But he couldn’t.

Mitchell hopped off the ladder with a light laugh. “But he didn’t fall over, so how can I be in trouble?”

There would be time to worry about the wedding later. Caught up in the moment, Jensen shook his head with a chuckle. “Next time, a little more of a heads-up would be

nice. That's all. And I wasn't daydreaming. I was just... distracted."

Both of the other men scoffed.

"It's late enough as it is," their father sighed, glancing up at the setting sun. "We're losing light fast. Let's get back to the house and hope your mother doesn't tan my hide for keeping us out so long."

"That's on you," Mitchell chuckled. "If anything, I'm telling her you held us hostage."

Jensen grinned, dragging himself back into the moment as the three of them made their way back to the house. It reminded him of how fortunate his life was, being around good people who inspired him to be better. There were few real arguments in the Reaves' home.

But his thoughts wandered again as he followed his brother and father inside. Just as they were pulling their hats and jackets off, he saw a familiar face peek out from the kitchen

doorway.

Their eyes met and she smiled before disappearing.

In Jensen's hurry to yank everything off, his scarf whipped Mitchell in the face. "Hey!" his brother protested.

"Oh." Jensen grinned sheepishly. "Sorry." Then he paused. "No, that's payback for earlier."

The boys elbowed each other playfully before Jensen stepped towards the kitchen. He had waited long enough to see her again. His eyes ran over Samantha, even though by then he had memorized every detail. It was still fun to see if something had changed in the time since he'd last seen her, however. Some days, she did something to her hair, and sometimes she ended up with a smudge of dirt or flour that he would wipe away for her.

"Hello," Jensen volunteered, noticing that the end of her braid had come undone. The

rest of it was bound to become unfurled any minute. He grinned.

Samantha was holding a pitcher, pouring water into the glasses around the table. She glanced up and flashed him a sly smile in return. It was only a flash as his family rounded the corner, but it had been a smile just for him. A surge of unadulterated joy rose in his chest. Only when Mitchell elbowed him did Jensen pull himself together.

He flattened his shirt and hurried to take his seat at the table. As the kitchen filled up with the rest of the family, he reluctantly restrained himself. They were only friends, Jensen reminded himself. There was no need to act so silly around everyone else.

His father said grace, and they all dug into their food. But Jensen hardly ate – he couldn't stop thinking about the girl facing him from the other side of the table.

“That’s right.”

Jensen jerked his head up when she started talking. He glanced around the table, wondering what he had missed. His hand fiddled with his fork as he tried not to appear too attentive.

She continued, "I grew up working with lamb wool and would be more than happy to help out in weaving new rugs."

His mother nodded with a twinkle in her eyes. "It'll be a wonderful adventure. I've always wanted to try, and this time of year is always the perfect time to resume old skills. And it's a good reason to bring that loom back in from the barn. It's in the older one, is it not, dear?"

Angus glanced up and shrugged. "We haven't pulled that old thing out since the boys were hardly walking. I would assume so, but I couldn't say. Mitchell can look for it after supper."

Scoffing, Mitchell made a face. "But you already said I could take a ride into town. She's expecting me, Pa."



“I’ll do it,” Jensen offered readily, sketching a quick glance over to Samantha. She met his gaze, and he grinned before turning back to his mother. “I’ll take any opportunity for some fresh air. I can find the loom and get it ready to bring into the house tomorrow morning.”

His mother smiled warmly. “That would be delightful, Jensen. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Mother. Glad to help.”

As he took another bite, Jensen cheated another look across the table. He and Samantha had only gone out for two evening walks in the last week, but already he was hoping for another opportunity.

She was slowly tracing her fork around in her beans, as though her mind was elsewhere. But then she glanced up again at him. And she smiled.

Jensen ducked his head. That had to mean

she was ready to join him. Already, he was collecting thoughts in his mind of everything he wanted to tell her. There were small details about his day that he wanted to discuss, and he wanted to ask her more about what she had done with her afternoon. He wanted to know what she had thought about, if she'd enjoyed it, and what she would like to do if she had the time. He wanted to talk to her about everything and nothing.

They couldn't finish supper soon enough. He ate too quickly and was left stuck at the table, unable to go anywhere with everyone still sitting there. Adrenaline rushed through his body as he helped clean up the kitchen.

Soon, Mitchell had left the house, off to meet his sweetheart. Jensen wasn't sure he'd be able to sit patiently through his mother's evening reading, but luckily she claimed she was tired and wanted to retire early to bed. Paula and Angus tidied up a few things and headed off to their room together.

"Good night," Jensen called, waving before ducking back into the kitchen.

When he turned, Samantha was setting her apron down and smoothing her skirts. He saw her take a deep breath before meeting his gaze.

He stuck out his arm. "Shall we?"

Samantha grinned before shyly walking over to meet him. "We shall." They walked quietly together to the door, grabbing their jacket and shawl before stepping outside. Jensen picked up the lantern and took her arm in his.

"Your mother's loom," she whispered, since they were still so close to the house. "Should we look for it first?"

"There's no need for that." Jensen shook his head as he gave her a grin. "I moved it to an unused stall in the other barn a week before you arrived. Father wanted to make space in the old one for some of the broken equipment. It's ready to be moved inside tomorrow."

She stopped, realizing what he was saying. “You knew all along you didn’t need to look for it? You should have said something.”

“But then I wouldn’t have a good excuse for being outside, would I?” Jensen gave her his most charming smile. He thought it was a little ridiculous, but it did the trick. Samantha blushed and ducked her head to hide the smile.

Except he had seen it. His heart thumped loudly as they continued their walk. Jensen couldn’t help himself around Samantha. There was something about the young woman that made him feel rebellious and eager to be independent.

Because he knew his parents wouldn’t approve, Jensen knew that in the morning he would be wrestling with his thoughts and uncertainty of the future. But in the twilight, he could enjoy the time he had with the sweet Samantha Loche.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Two

“I thought you said you wanted to go to bed,” Angus noted when Paula continued to read quietly in their room.

She glanced up mildly as he worked at his table, sorting through numbers. He was wearing his spectacles and though she knew how he hated wearing them, Paula thought he looked quite distinguished.

“I will,” she said at last. Then she glanced at the book in her hands. It was a small book of poetry one of their friends from church had lent her when she mentioned she had been wishing for new material to read.

Angus raised his eyebrow. “We could have read out in the parlor, then.”

When he gave her that frank look of his,

Paula forgot their years together. She remembered the young, penniless man who could give her little besides his heart. She remembered his proposal, when he swore to always stand by her side.

She gave him a smile. They had come a long way since that proposal—a very long way. “This is fine, dear. It’s nice having time to ourselves, is it not? This time of year always keeps you so busy. You were late coming back to the house for the third time this week.”

“So you do keep track,” he said, referring to a conversation they had set aside the other day.

Winking to assure him that she wasn’t serious, Paula settled her book down and made her way across the room. “How could I not keep track? I’m aware every day when you’re not in the house.”

He chuckled as he watched her. It was a large house, and a big room just for them. Though they had other rooms for more work and a study, the two of them had always liked



having small desks in their bedroom so they could keep each other company. She had always thought it such a bore having the two of them at opposite ends of the house when they could be in one space together.

Paula rounded the bed and came over to set her hands on his shoulders. They were tense, as usual. He sighed as she dug her fingers into the muscle to help him relax. "You're just trying to make me confess how much bacon I ate this morning," he groaned.

She laughed. "Confess? Angus, I know exactly how much you ate. That's why no one in this house will be eating bacon or sausages for the next week. I keep telling you, it's about self-control. If you can manage the books for your ranch, then you can certainly control your appetite."

"I can control myself," her husband replied plaintively. Then he turned and took one of her hands, kissing it before she could pull herself free. "Except around you, of course."

“You’re such a rascal.” Paula felt a blush flood over her cheeks. Even after all these years together, he could still tease her like they were youths dancing in the street. Her heart skipped a beat as he gave her that fond smile. Warmth flooded her limbs, cozier than any fire could ever feel.

When he stood, he wrapped his other arm around her. A comfortable silence settled between the two of them. The one place in the world where she felt most at home was within his arms. Even as they grew older and grew closer, she could never get enough. Her eyes closed as she rested her head against his shoulder.

“The only rascal brave enough to marry someone so perfect,” Angus claimed after kissing the top of her head. “You’re as pretty as the day I met you.”

“I’m still not making you bacon tomorrow,” she teased him. Looking up to meet his gaze, Paula grinned. “And you’re just as wonderful and handsome.”

His brow creased. “You’re always giving me more compliments than I can take.”

“It’s not a competition,” she assured him with a squeeze. “Now, are you finished with your books or not? It feels like it’s going to be a chilly night, and I need someone to warm my toes under those blankets.”

Taking a step back, Angus glanced at his desk. A frown of another kind began to tug at him. “Well, I suppose it could wait until tomorrow. Nothing will change before then, eh?”

Paula nodded as she took a step back. “Nothing at all.” She opened her mouth to say something more when she thought she heard something nearby.

Voices. No, not just that. Laughter. With a slight turn of her head, she could immediately tell that it was not coming from inside the house. It was Samantha and her escort, who must have been near the windows.

She was relaxing, knowing she didn't need to worry, when she turned over to her husband. Angus had heard, as well. She couldn't help but tense up. His frown deepened as he strained to make sense of the noise. It faded away, however, leaving them in silence.

Paula held her breath and waited.

"Did you hear that?" Angus turned, as though he couldn't tell where the sound was coming from.

They were certainly getting older. He used to hear her footsteps from across the house.

But Paula found herself suddenly grateful. The idea of her husband finding Samantha outside at this time of night could not end well. He could always jump to conclusions much quicker than anyone else she knew. Though she loved the man, she knew his imperfections. That was what it took to truly love someone.

She shook her head and put a hand on his arm. "It's nothing," she found herself saying. "I think it was simply Jensen coming back inside."

Angus hesitated, scratching his stubbly cheek. He always did that when he was worrying. But surely, Paula thought, it wasn't about the noise outside. She wondered what more could be on his mind.

The best thing she could do was distract him. Paula gave him another squeeze and gestured to their bed. "I think I'll bring us some glasses of water. Climb into bed and I'll be back in a moment."

It only took a moment to convince him. Paula quietly made her way out into the hall and down towards the kitchen to find water. On the way, however, she took a detour to the back door to look outside.

Her assumptions had been correct. Though Angus would have only been mildly concerned to find Samantha out walking alone, he would have been much more irritated to learn that a

certain young gentleman was escorting her. Any concerns that would come to his mind would probably be found to be true.

Anyone could see in the way the two walked together in the moonlight that there was something between them. Paula had attempted to ignore it. Then, she had turned a blind eye so she could deny it as necessary. Except, now, she saw Samantha and Jensen side by side, stealing glances at one another with broad smiles. Her heart thumped and she knew exactly what they were feeling.

“Ah, to be young again,” Paula mused to herself.

Though she meant to keep walking, she couldn't help but take a moment to watch them. She wondered if they knew what they were doing: not simply walking, but taking time together on their own. It was a wonderful time, one without commitments or responsibilities or fears.

A wonderful time, certainly, but it couldn't last long. They would have to come

up for air and realize their situation. A difficult situation. One that might even be impossible.

Paula knew what it meant to be in love. And she knew how hard it could be. Her life with Angus had not been easy. There had been many complications and troubles along the way. They still argued and held different opinions.

She forced herself to turn away, towards the kitchen. If she stayed out too long, Angus would come looking for her. And if he passed by any windows or doors, he would find his son out walking with a pretty young maiden who he was not promised to.

Paula was torn. She wanted Jensen to be happy. Though she didn't know how he felt about Miss Corley, she was certain that her son knew his duty and would obey his parents' wishes. He was a kind man with a good head on his shoulders. Paula also wanted her husband to be happy.

The man had his own ideas, based on his

aspirations from their youth. He wanted to build a western dynasty, to live alongside the wilderness with all its challenges. The entire town knew how much he loved his ranch and wanted it to thrive. Building connections would help their business to grow, and marriages were still a helpful way to make that happen.

If their son married Miss Corley, Angus would get what he wanted. But Paula wasn't certain that Jensen would have what he wanted. If her son turned the promised young woman away, her husband could very well lose his best chance at making certain connections.

It made her nervous now that there might be a situation where only one of her men wound up happy.

As she poured two glasses of water, Paula considered her options. But she could hear the voices coming closer. A lantern swung closed until it suddenly went out. Soon, there were footsteps on the back porch. The door she had stood at only moments ago creaked open.



Taking a sip of her water, she listened to the muffled whispers of Jensen and Samantha returning inside.

“Hush,” she heard Samantha giggle. “Set that lantern down, Jensen. Careful, please.”

“I’m always careful,” Jensen responded and paused. “I’m sorry, I’m afraid I just elbowed you. Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine. Did you hear that?”

Paula paused. She felt a droplet of water trickle down her hand. Though she couldn’t explain why she was attempting to stay hidden, she knew how it was to hold a dear secret. And the way both of the young adults had acted recently, she thought they could use some joy and mischief.

A moment later, Jensen quietly led Samantha to her room and then went in the other direction to his own. He passed the hall by the open door leading into the kitchen, but

he never glanced over or noticed his mother.

She took another sip of water and listened to his door shut. It was a familiar sound she had learned many years ago. Once the house was built, Paula recalled often listening to her home's sounds and creaks. Now, it felt as familiar as the back of her hand.

Finally, she picked up the glasses and took them down the hall to her husband. He was dozing in the bed but jerked awake when she closed the door. Angus straightened up and offered her a sleepy smile.

“You took your sweet time,” he noted. “Is everything settled?”

Paula nodded and said, “Of course. It was only Jensen.” She brought him his glass.

The two of them didn't like to keep secrets from one another. It burned her soul from the inside out to consider keeping such information about Jensen from him. But Paula couldn't bring herself to open her mouth. It

wasn't her story to tell, and she didn't want to ruin what little happiness the two young people had found.

People deserved to keep the love they found, she thought. But even Paula wasn't so foolish to know that such an idea didn't make for a strong argument. As she curled up in bed with her husband, she considered her options.

Lately, when she thought of Samantha, she thought of the daughter she never raised.

After she blew out the candle, Paula inhaled slowly. She turned over to her husband and propped her head up. "Angus?"

He turned to her. "Yes, Paula?"

"Do you ever think about her?"

Angus's breath slowed. He didn't have to ask to know exactly who she was asking about. He cleared his throat and reached out to her in the darkness. Reluctantly, she gave him her hand. It took him a minute to

respond. "Yes. Every day."

Though she had originally wanted to ask him another question, there was something about the tone in his voice that made her pause—something about the weariness she could feel ebbing from her husband touched her. It reminded Paula that she wasn't alone.

She settled into her blankets and found comfort in his answer. He had grieved for the lost babe as well, but not nearly so deeply as herself. Those were difficult days. Ever since, it had been difficult for them to talk about their painful past. Sometimes, she worried that he had forgotten.

But he hadn't. The babe was not forgotten. They were still a family. Paula wasn't going to lose Jensen, nor would she lose Angus or Mitchell. She took another deep breath and relaxed.

Though she didn't have all the answers, she felt that she was doing her best. And that would have to be enough.





# Chapter Twenty- Three

It was a warm morning.

Samantha tucked her hair up in a handkerchief and tied her skirts so they wouldn't get in her way as she handled the laundry. She had volunteered to handle the task on her own, since Paula wasn't feeling well.

The poor woman had not slept much, and it showed when they rose and started gathering eggs. When Paula yawned for the fifth time, Samantha had determined that she must return to bed. Though there was work to be done, the woman clearly needed a good rest. She did so much already.

"I couldn't leave you on your own," Paula had protested, patting Samantha's cheek. "That would hardly be kind of me."

“It would be wrong to choose my attention over your health,” Samantha reminded her. “Lie down for an hour or two. Whatever you need. I’m sure I can find something to occupy my time; it’s Thursday, is it not? I can tend to the washing.”

Though it had taken a few more minutes for Paula to be convinced, they worked it out. If she needed anything, Samantha would immediately go to her side. But she didn’t plan on that. Soon, the men were off to the cattle and she was guiding Paula to her bedroom.

When she glanced around the kitchen, Samantha hesitated. She hated being left on her own in the house. It wasn’t her home--she was only a guest. No matter how comfortably she settled in with the Reaves family, she tried to remind herself of this every day.

“The laundry, then,” she told herself. A small gesture to show her gratitude for all that they did for her. The work could be both tedious and tiring, but she didn’t mind as long as she could keep her hands busy.



Her parents had raised her that way. As she collected towels for the laundry, Samantha couldn't help but turn her thoughts to her family. It was easy to live in the moment on the ranch, but without anyone to keep her company, she couldn't help but picture them again.

She sniffed but managed to hold back the tears.

They would be proud of her; she knew that. It helped her to keep breathing. They would be glad that she was taking care of herself and had found a place to stay. Though there was a small concern in the back of her head that she had not escaped far enough, Samantha's panic had faded into a sense of reality. If she wanted justice for her parents, she would have to plan.

Shaking her head, Samantha inhaled deeply upon stepping outside. If she buried herself too far into her thoughts, she wouldn't get anything done. She hefted up the basket and made her way across the yard.

Her skirt was hitched up and out of the way, and her hair was pinned back. Laundry was a simple enough task, something that always needed to be done. The warm sun shone down.

Humming, she sorted the clothes and pulled out the lye soap. After settling herself on a bench, she bent over and started to scrub. Her hands would grow dry and rough, but she didn't mind. But a moment later, she glanced at her nails and wondered about Jensen.

Would he mind?

They didn't hold hands, or even walk arm-in-arm with one another for more than a moment. The thought of touching him was almost too exhilarating. Besides, there was just enough sensibility nudging her to keep from drawing too close, from doing too much.

It wasn't like he seriously admired her, for they weren't courting. She shook her head, oblivious to the smile playing on her lips. They were not courting. No, they were merely friends. Good friends who enjoyed spending

time together. Which they could only do when there was no one else to interrupt them.

Still, he was a handsome young man. Samantha could picture him perfectly. There was that soft hair, those sweet eyes, his strong cheekbones. There was the way he always opened doors for her and aimed to be as helpful as possible. Sometimes he stumbled, but she didn't mind. It reminded her that he had his own imperfections as well. And of course, that only made her want to know him more.

The way he talked about everything made her want to fall in love with everything he loved, as well. His family, his horse, his ranch, the weather—everything.

The day was hot and only grew hotter. Sweat trickled down Samantha's brow and her blouse grew damp. But she didn't mind. Each item was carefully rinsed, scrubbed, rinsed again, and set in a second basket until she could hang everything up on the clothesline just a few yards away. Though she hadn't handled the Reaves' laundry on her own

before, she knew the chore was the same wherever one went.

Laundry was busywork, but it didn't require a lot of mental effort. At least, she didn't think it did, until she had hung up half the clean towels. They were wrinkled, but the sun was certain to dry them soon. Samantha glanced up to find it was noontime.

There was the sound of hoofbeats.

She turned, raising a hand to shield her gaze. It was terribly bright and even as she squinted, Samantha wasn't certain who it might be until they passed through the gate. At first, she had hoped to find Jensen there. He had joined her for snatched moments during a few afternoons, finding excuses to come say hello.

But it wasn't him.

"Good day." Mr. Reaves gave her a sharp nod as he slid down off his horse.

She dropped her arm with a slight wave.  
“Good afternoon, sir.”

He looped the reins around a tree branch. Just as she thought of mentioning to him that his wife might still be sleeping, he paused to face her with a frown.

“What did you wash these linens with?”

Samantha paused, glancing at the two sheets she had just hung up. Her heart skipped a beat as she glanced at him and then at the laundry bucket. “With the lye soap and the brush, Mr. Reaves. Like the towels from last week.”

The man was shaking his head before she had finished what she was saying. She rubbed her hands together as he stared at the cloth. Mr. Reaves shook his head. “You can’t... you can’t do that. That’s not how it works. Not these linens. No, they’re French, girl. French linens. You can’t use lye soap on them!”

She took a step back in surprise. A lump

formed in her throat as Mr. Reaves scolded her. French linen, apparently, could only be cleaned with a particular milk-based soap, and no brush.

“Look at these threads.” He grabbed her elbow to point out a particular hem, and the hair on the back of her neck stood up. She hadn’t noticed it was falling apart when she had started to wash it. Mr. Reaves grabbed a thread and yanked. It began to unravel so easily that she jumped back. Samantha winced, though she couldn’t say if it was from his stern grasp or the linens she had ruined.

“I... I didn’t think,” Samantha started in embarrassment, uncertainty flooding through her. The cheerful afternoon was put on pause as she gulped loudly and tried to think.

He let go of her. “Of course you didn’t, did you? You’re still a child! These were specially made for Paula. Sent all the way from Paris! Do you even know where that is? I can’t just find more of these in town. I couldn’t even find them in New York. Ruined! After ten years, they’re ruined. Do you know what that

means?”

Samantha didn't know how to answer. She scrambled for something to say, but her mouth was left hanging open as she looked between the linens and Mr. Reaves. Something tightened in her stomach. After all he and his family had done for her, the idea of ruining their property filled her with dread.

There was a dark flash in his eyes when he looked at her.

Then she heard something. Paula called out, “Angus, don't be rude. It simply means that our linens are ten years old. They're bound to fall apart eventually.” The woman's voice carried well across the yard, just like her husband's.

Looking to the house, Samantha found the older woman leaning out of the window with a tired smile. She wondered how much had been heard. She swallowed hard, not wanting to disappoint anyone. And yet she had just ruined their linens. Certainly, she had noticed they were nice. Everything in the Reaves'

house was nice. They lived well and took good care of everything they owned. After the shelter they had granted her, the lovely dress Paula gave her, after everything they had done for her.

“Paula, I am only trying to teach the girl—” Angus started sternly.

But she waved an arm. “We can worry about the laundry later. Come inside. Your face is red. Did you forget your hat again?”

Samantha swallowed the lump in her throat as she glanced over at Mr. Reaves. The man’s demeanor softened slightly. He shrugged his shoulders and glanced around before rubbing the back of his neck.

“If I did, it’s because it isn’t where I left it,” Mr. Reaves grumbled finally.

His wife straightened up. “Come in, then, and stop hassling Samantha.”

There was still unease in her stomach as



she watched the man turn away. She could feel the lye soap drying out her hands and the damp spots of the laundry water that had gotten on her dress. But nothing shamed her more than what had just happened.

Before Mr. Reaves made it to the porch, still scowling, he passed her a quick look over his shoulder. Samantha stiffened. Then the door opened before him and his wife appeared, enveloping him into the shade.

It had only been a moment. But something cold ran down her spine and made her shiver. Her hands balled into fists and suddenly, the sun's rays felt a hundred times hotter. She was reminded of the burn on her calf that was still sensitive to the touch. The same panic that had consumed her on that terrible night grabbed at her heart again, holding her still. Samantha could hardly breathe, her jaw tight as she stared at the porch.

She wasn't certain at first what had just happened. Not until she turned away and closed her eyes. Then she saw it again—a bitter man walking through the door. But in

her mind, it wasn't Mr. Reaves.

It was Mr. Corley.

Shuddering, she gritted her teeth. She could still picture the man with his graying hair, long sideburns, and deep-set gaze that always burned with anger. He had never been polite to her. He had always brushed her off or pretended she didn't exist while speaking with her father.

Thinking of him brought back the wave of emotions as she recalled her circumstances. Samantha touched the linens as though she might take them down, but she couldn't stop thinking of Mr. Corley. The man had to be punished for his crimes. She was still determined to bring her parents justice. As she glanced back at the house, however, she realized it would take more work than she'd initially thought.

For the next couple of hours, Samantha tried to rectify her mistake with the laundry and was consumed with her thoughts. Though the Reaves attempted to engage her in some

light conversation, she quietly brushed aside any questions and tried not to make any more mistakes.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Four

Their father had hardly returned to the fields when he announced that they were finishing up for the day. Though they had considered scouting in the northwest, Angus decided it could wait.

“We’ve been late enough to supper this week,” he told them gruffly. “There’s no need to upset your mother again. Pack your ropes and let’s turn around. We’ll call it an early night.”

Mitchell whooped. “I won’t complain!”

Nor would Jensen. The boys grinned at each other before gathering their belongings and climbing onto their horses. Their father led the way back towards the house as Jensen began exploring his options for the remainder of the afternoon.

Maybe he could take a walk with Samantha while the sun set. That would make for a lovely view. His eyes drifted over the landscape. She had mentioned wishing to explore more of their property since he talked about it so much. The thought made him grin sheepishly.

His mind jumped ahead with the idea as he outlined every little corner and grove. She could see the cattle, the valleys, the apple tree, the youngest calves. There was so much that he wanted to show her. Though their home was wonderful, Samantha was missing out on the world around her. And it was right there, waiting.

His heart pounded. It was perfect.

All he had to do was make sure she said yes, and that no one else came with them. He liked spending time alone with Samantha. She was more open, talking freely about her hopes and dreams. The young woman had already shared some of her more intimate stories of her childhood. She spoke of her infrequent travels and the shop she had worked so hard

to help her family.

Beyond that, though, there was little else she shared. It felt like she was always closed, and he had to pry open her mind. Not that he minded. It was hunting for pearls among oysters. Everything he learned only made her better. Samantha was a beautiful woman who tried her best to help those around her. It was impossible not to like her.

And now, he had a free afternoon for them to spend together.

Jensen jumped off his horse when they reached the barns, not even bothering to unsaddle the animal. His eyes skipped over to his brother and father, who were discussing their next trip into town. Mitchell had just offered to take the wagon; it would be the perfect time to steal a few hours with his sweetheart while the sun was still up and they could do more than their usual evening chaperoned activities.

“I’ll be right back,” Jensen offered as he headed up to the house. He wasn’t sure if the



others were listening, but they wouldn't touch his horse. They all knew better than to interfere with each other's mounts, even if they were looking to be helpful.

Turning to his house, his eyes searched the open windows to see if he could find Samantha moving around. He walked swiftly up the steps and into the hallway, ears attuned. When Jensen turned into the kitchen, he found his mother but not the girl he was looking for.

Paula looked up and smiled. "Hello, Jensen. Your father brought you boys home, then?"

Trying not to look too disappointed, he nodded, rubbing his neck and glancing around. "I thought I might... well, Samantha said the other day she was curious about our ranch. I thought she might like a... a tour. Would that be all right?"

His mother shot him a curious look before turning back to the dough that she was kneading with both hands. "If she would like

to, then certainly. I have supper under control. Miss Samantha is in the parlor window seat. However, I'm not certain she's up for it."

Two steps down the hall, Jensen paused and turned back. "What do you mean? Is she all right?"

Thinking back to the day when she had erupted into tears, he was torn between not wanting to bother her and wanting to rescue her. Had she been crying? Had something more happened? Or had she fallen ill? Jensen tried to think back to the morning. Nothing struck his mind as out of the ordinary.

Paula glanced up at him. "I mean that she may not feel up to it, Jensen. I'm not certain what more you expect me to say."

He swallowed. "Right. My apologies. I... well, I'll go see her. Perhaps she needs something to brighten up her day."

Though he thought his mother mumbled something as he turned away, it wasn't loud

enough to hear and he decided not to allow himself to be distracted. He wanted to see Samantha. If she wasn't hiding in her room, then certainly she would be comfortable enough to join him out on the ranch.

Jensen made his way down the hall, skirting to the left to find the parlor empty. He paused to carefully look around. There were the various seats, the table, the knitting basket, and the fireplace. His eyes turned towards the window, where the curtains were blowing softly in the wind.

Of course. They were a soft blue color, but could still cover up someone sitting in the seat. It used to be his favorite hiding spot. Jensen felt his heart skip a beat as he crossed the threshold and reached out for the curtains.

There she was.

Samantha had her knees tucked up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Her eyes were turned away from him, studying the world outside. He had walked quietly enough that she didn't even notice him until he took a

seat beside her. Only then did she turn and open her eyes wide.

“Hello.” He gave her a small smile.

Jensen hoped she would return it, but he could sense something different about her. No, he decided a second later, it wasn't that it was different. It was only that she hadn't worn that weary look for several days. He thought she had been unloading her worries and grief. But from the cloud now hanging over her head, it was clear that those concerns had returned. His heart went out to her, and it took all his strength not to wrap her in his arms.

She offered a small shrug.

“Hello,” Samantha replied. Her voice was hardly above a whisper. She tried to give him a smile and then turned back to the window with a quiet sigh.

A somberness settled over them, but it only made Jensen itch. He scratched his forearm as his eyes drifted from Samantha to

outside the window, where she was looking. She didn't appear to be staring at anything in particular. Nothing was moving, except for a light breeze among their lemon trees. The branches danced as though they were waving. Jensen almost wanted to wave back. But then he returned to Samantha and tried to think.

Interrupting the silence felt like he would be pushing something off a ledge. He found himself doing it anyway, however, for her sake. Her eyes were rimmed with red, as though she were holding back tears.

"You don't need to stay hidden behind windows," he ventured gently. Jensen leaned forward to get her attention but didn't touch her. He worried that if he did, Samantha might break. "Why don't you come see the ranch? We can make an afternoon of it."

Samantha didn't turn to look at him as she shrugged. "That might not be a good idea." She spoke softly, devoid of emotion. It almost pained him to hear it. "I'm sure I'll need to prepare supper soon."

There was something in her voice that concerned him. Jensen swallowed hard and gave her a look over to see if she had been injured. His father had stopped by the house earlier, but he hadn't said anything about Samantha. When he thought of everyone gathered around the table that morning, he couldn't recall her being upset.

“Samantha? What’s on your mind?”

She looked askance before gulping. There was a quick intake of breath as she bit her lip. “I was only thinking about... Jensen, what if... what if I told that...”

“That what?” he prompted when she didn't continue.

But the darkness passed. Samantha turned back to the window with a sigh. “It’s nothing, I’m sorry. It’s not your trouble. I’m just thinking.”

For a second, he considered asking her what was on her mind. But Jensen could see

her stubborn lower lip and knew that she wouldn't tell him until she was ready.

They could find some hope, in the meantime. He stood up, determined to make her smile. Sometimes, too much thinking wasn't a good idea. Sometimes, they had to embrace the opportunities given to them. "Come, Samantha! It's your lucky day. We're going to say hello to the newest calves. Then I can show you my favorite tree."

She hesitated and shook her head. "Jensen, I don't know..."

"But I do," he insisted and knelt as he grasped her hand. Her eyes widened, and he grinned at finally getting a reaction. "Just for a couple of hours. We'll return before dark. Please don't tell me no."

Her eyes drifted towards the direction of the kitchen. "But won't...?"

Jensen shook his head. "They won't. Come join me. Don't you want to... to feel the wind

in your hair? Get out of the house? Spend some time together?" he asked her hopefully. "Just for a little while. It'll be a nice break for both of us, away from... from everything."

Though she hesitated, he could see her thinking. She looked like she was about to say yes, until she shook her head and withdrew her hand. "I'm sorry, I can't. I don't know how to... to ride a horse," she admitted, biting her lip.

Jensen leapt to his feet, tossing the curtain aside. It made a loud whip of a sound that jerked Samantha back around to him. He grinned as he extended his arm to her. "Then I'm going to teach you how to ride," he announced.

"What? Right now?" Samantha's eyes widened

"Of course, right now." He nodded. "There's no better time. By the time we're done, I'm certain you won't want to get off



that horse. Everyone who lives in the west should be able to ride a horse. I'll bet you're a natural."

Her cheeks flushed at the praise, which only made his grin widen and his hopes rise. "I don't know about that, Jensen. I don't want to be a bother. What if your father needs the horses? Or what if something goes wrong?"

"It won't," he assured her. "Not while I'm around. I promise. You trust me, don't you?"

Her eyes lifted to meet his. There was a flicker there, Jensen was certain he had seen it. She stared at him. Then, there was the smallest twitch in her lips before she nodded.

"I suppose I do," she admitted, almost grudgingly. Taking a deep breath, she set her feet on the ground. "You won't make me regret this, will you?"

She put out her hand and let him pull her up. Soon, he had whisked her away from her troubles, and Jensen hoped they would stay

away. Samantha deserved happiness. And he would do whatever he could to make sure she found it.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Five

“I see Mitchell.”

Paula tightened her grip on the curtain as she squinted out the window. The sun was setting behind the figure with the wagon, but it was clearly her youngest son. He never liked wearing his hat, just like his father, and the silhouette wasn't wearing one. She frowned. He was going to end up with a terribly red face if he wasn't careful.

“That's good.” Angus cleared his throat. “Sweet pea, they're grown men. I'm sure everything is fine. You don't need to worry about them anymore.”

She tutted. “I'm their mother. All I can do is worry. How can you not?” She turned with a frown.

He had a piece of pork roast halfway to his mouth. When he felt her gaze, he stopped and offered a sheepish smile. Slowly, he set his fork and knife on the table. Angus rubbed his hands on the napkin before making his way over to the window beside her.

“Because we raised them to be smart and good,” he reminded her. “How could they be anything else? Whatever they are doing, I’m sure they’re safe and on their way here. As you said, there’s Mitchell. Although, to be frank, I’m rather surprised he’s back this early.”

A small smile climbed across her lips as she heard how disgruntled he sounded. “You can’t blame a boy in love,” she reminded him gently.

“It’s irresponsible,” he muttered. “What her parents must think of us raising him like that...”

“Like your parents raised you?” Paula pointed out. “My father worried we would end up with a shotgun wedding. You can’t blame

your children for being so much like you. Especially since they haven't even done anything yet."

He gave the window another look and then turned to her. "A minute ago, you were worried about them. Now you're defending their actions?"

"I'm their mother," she teased him. "I can do whatever I want." She rested a hand on his chest before her smile softened. "As for you, Angus, you've been irritable all day. The way you treated Samantha was not acceptable."

Taking a step back, Angus shook his head. "Dear, we already spoke about this. I told you I didn't mean to be so angry. But those linens, Paula. Don't you remember what they meant to us? What they still do?"

"Just because they mean something to us about our love doesn't mean that what happens to such material items affects how we feel about each other," she pointed out. Then she shook her head. "It's not about that. You were uneasy this morning, as well. What's on

your mind?”

As Angus dropped his gaze, she caught a moment of vulnerability. It wasn't something she saw often, and she was fairly certain at this point in their lives that she was the only one to ever see it. She took his hand and gave it a comforting squeeze.

Finally, he sighed. “We’re just growing old. Not old, but... our boys are grown. They’re adults, Paula. They need to be building their own lives and creating their own futures. I just keep worrying that we haven’t done enough for them. I’m trying to build something out here. But what if it’s not enough?”

The look on his face made her heart soften. The man worried more as they grew older, but it was hard to see. That made her ache, having him carry those weights when he didn’t have to do it alone. She squeezed his hand again. Wrapping her arms around his large build, she tucked her head under his chin and listened to his heartbeat.



“Your best will always be more than enough,” she assured him in a whisper.

He kissed the top of her head in reply.

“Gross,” a familiar whine came muffled from the other side of the door.

Paula opened her eyes to find Mitchell there scrunching his nose. The face was so silly that she couldn’t help but laugh. She patted Angus “What? Don’t you take your sweetheart into embraces?”

“Yes,” Mitchell said plaintively, “but she’s not my parents. You two are crazy.”

“Watch your mouth, young man,” Angus told him sternly. “Or we’ll send you to your room without supper. We’ll be whatever type of parents we desire to be,” he added when their son raised his eyebrows.

But Paula knew he was joking and couldn’t help but giggle. Mitchell made another face before pulling off his jacket and

stepping around them to find some water. She was just about to turn back to her husband when the young man called over his shoulder to them.

“There’s a note in my jacket for you!”

“For who?” Paula called back.

“For you! Both of you, Ma.”

Angus sighed. “When you’re speaking to your mother, Mitchell, please be present in the same room as her. There’s no need for such uncouth behavior.”

There was tinkling in the kitchen before they heard footsteps. Then, the young man peeked his head into the hall with an annoyed smile. “Letter. In my jacket. It’s an invitation,” he added before disappearing again. More footsteps and more tinkling.

Beside her, Angus huffed. “That boy...”

She patted his arm. "He's just being loud; he's not trying to disrespect us. Trust me, he knows better. Now, about this letter. What sort of invitation? Most folks in town know that Mitchell can't be trusted with important communications."

Her husband scoffed but didn't say anything. If either of them got started on that particular issue, they would never stop. When Mitchell turned twelve, he had been thrilled at the idea of being independent enough to travel to town alone. That was the age she and Angus had decided upon for him since they'd done the same for Jensen.

But Mitchell was always easily distracted and had already made friends with everyone in town. He had attempted to sneak into the saloon, ended up wrestling with two card players, and stumbled home in the dark since he had forgotten his horse.

It was a story they'd all learned to laugh about later. But she had never received the expected letter from her sister that day, nor had Angus received news about his sick cattle.

The herd had been ruined on their travels and when he'd finally received a new letter, it had been too late. Though they assumed Mitchell had learned his lesson, a few more incidents had proven to everyone that he couldn't be trusted with important papers.

She sighed at the memories. Mitchell had learned to behave better, and they had learned not to leave him with significant responsibilities like the mail. To have anyone hand him something meant they must not know him at all.

"Who could this be from?" After shuffling around in the pockets, she found the crumpled paper.

The envelope had been nice at some point. Probably up until the moment Mitchell shoved it into his pockets. She couldn't help but be mildly amused at her grown son, who still liked to play more than think. It wasn't always what they wanted, but it kept her on her toes.

There was a pressed seal to close it with their family name written crisply across the

front. The ink sparkled in the sunlight, making her pause and study it closer. Then she turned it to the wax seal on the back and raised her eyebrows at her husband.

“Does this look familiar to you?” she asked him.

He shrugged at her. “Not really. No one uses wax anymore, do they? Such a tedious task. And easily to be burned, you know.”

She grinned. “Yes, I do know. I hemmed too many sleeves of yours in the first years of our marriage. We won’t know who it’s from until we open it.” So she did, tugging carefully at the edges until the folded piece of paper was freed.

Inside was a short note with a few numbers written in a similar calligraphy script from the letter. Paula skimmed it before glancing down at the bottom of the paper to find who this invitation had come from.

“Ah.” Angus had noticed as well. “The

Corleys.”

Her stomach flopped. Paula tried to ignore it as she cleared her throat and resumed reading the entirety of the letter before she decided to say anything. It was a request from the Corleys for the families to meet again. There were final wedding arrangements to be made, after all. They had suggested two nights from then. She noticed how they wavered on the proposed location, stating that their next supper could occur at the Corleys’ place, certainly, but Caroline might appreciate seeing her home-to-be again.

In other words, they were looking to invite themselves over to supper. Annoyance swept over her, so she shook her head in an attempt to get rid of it. She didn’t want to think rudely of the family. Surely, she convinced herself, they meant well. The family perhaps had a different idea of what manners meant.

“They want to come to supper again.” She cleared her throat. “On Sunday.”

He shrugged. “I suppose that’s fine. What

do you think?"

Paula stared at the note as she contemplated her options. There weren't too many of them. And because she ran the house and would be hostess, she knew Angus would do as she suggested. Part of her wondered if she could just cancel it. Send them on their way.

Where were those rude thoughts coming from? She wasn't certain. They felt uncomfortable in the back of her mind. She shrugged the feeling away and cleared her throat again.

"Well?" Angus pressed. "We're not busy on Sunday, are we?"

"No, but... it's rather soon," Paula started slowly as an idea came to mind. "Why, we wouldn't be able to get a response to them until tomorrow. After all, don't you see? They clearly want to attend us here. It would be terribly rude to send an official invitation the day before. Very unkind. No, we had best put it off."

He took the letter and scanned it. “They don’t mean to be rude, you know. Miss Caroline wants to see the house again. As she should. She’ll be wanting to know what she can bring and what to expect. The wedding is soon, Paula—it’s only a matter of weeks. We can’t put this off.”

“Only a couple of days,” she assured him. “We’ll send Jensen into town with our letter tomorrow. What about next Thursday?”

Angus didn’t look too confident. Warily, he fiddled with the paper. “Thursday? That’s several days away. Nearly a week. No, we had best not wait that long. Monday, then. That is still within the parameters of cordiality, is it not?”

“What about Wednesday?” She bartered in return.

He gave her a teasing smile before returning the note into her hands. “Tuesday it is, and not a day later. Write up a response,



would you? Whenever Jensen returns home, then we'll make sure he delivers it tomorrow. And best that he does. I've run out of shoeshine."

"And pepper," Paula added absently. She fiddled with the letter in the hallway as her husband walked away.

Her heart pounded. What had she just done? Paula grew concerned with herself, wondering why she was trying to ruin her son's future. Of course, they needed to talk with the Corleys. There was still so much to learn about them and so many plans to make for their wedding. Paula smiled. She forced her mind to happier thoughts as she turned back towards the kitchen to finish supper. Her boy was going to be married.





# Chapter Twenty-Six

Time was flying by.

Samantha woke up and stretched before turning to her window. She grinned, finding bright streaks of light streaming through as the sun appeared to be waking up as well. Fixing her bed covers, she pulled back the curtains to enjoy the view.

For the first time in two weeks, Samantha wasn't waking up sore after riding horses all afternoon. With the cattle managed, Jensen had been able to finish up early most days with his brother and father, and they would return early to the house to relax. She didn't want to arouse suspicions, so they didn't go riding every day. But frequently, he would show her the trees, the animals, and the land.

Her first time on a ranch, she could hardly believe it. Samantha wondered how easy it was to forget how big the world was. And there she was, only on one ranch.

“But it is a big ranch,” Jensen would chuckle as a reminder. “My father was very specific about wanting enough land. We have hundreds of acres, you know.”

She did know. But it was one thing to hear it and another to see it. Samantha’s heart pounded at the sight of so much life around her. On several occasions she had climbed off the horse to dance around and cheer.

“What are you doing?” Jensen had asked the first time. He slid off his own horse, grabbing both animals’ reins.

Smiling, she waved. “What do you think I’m doing? There’s so much out here, Jensen. I can breathe it in. Isn’t this life wonderful?”

He had laughed, but not in a cruel manner. Instead, he settled the horses and hurried to join her. The enthusiasm caught her before she could help it as she grabbed his hands and spun them around. They had laughed and walked around for hours before returning to the house.

Her stomach growled that morning as a reminder of how much more activity she was getting. She wrinkled her nose but couldn't help it as a smile spread across her face.

The other day had been lovely. And now that she felt comfortable astride a tall steed, Samantha wondered how fortunate she had become to have time with such a gentleman. Jensen was as kind as he was handsome. She was still thinking about him when she walked into the kitchen.

Mr. and Mrs. Reaves were already there.

"We've delayed long enough," Mr. Reaves was saying. "He caught me in town yesterday asking why we canceled and haven't scheduled another time. I couldn't help it. They are coming over tomorrow. I will hire the Henderson girl to prepare supper, if I must."

Paula sighed as she fiddled with her apron. "I don't see why you couldn't have

talked to me about this first, Angus. You know how I don't like making last-minute plans. It's a disservice to everyone."

"It wouldn't be last-minute if you hadn't canceled their first invitation weeks ago." He cleared his throat. "Besides, Jensen's wedding is in two weeks. We can't keep putting it off. They're going to be part of our family, you know. If you're facing any qualms..."

The woman shook her head. "I'm not. I... I don't know what I'm thinking. I suppose you're right, Angus."

"That was bound to happen eventually," he pointed out with a chuckle and kissed his wife's forehead. It was a sweet gesture that normally would have made Samantha smile.

But nausea had overwhelmed her. The conversation she walked in on encompassed everything she had set aside for too long. Though they hadn't said any names, she realized they were talking about the family that Jensen was going to marry into. He was still engaged.

A knot formed in her stomach. It was suddenly hard to breathe. Samantha leaned into the wall for support as she tried to inhale. Somehow, she had stopped thinking about the future. She had been playing around too long, living in a fantasy world with Jensen. Too much time had passed.

Her parents came to mind and she froze. They were gone. She had left the past behind, as well. How could she be forgetting them? Was she already forsaking them, only a month after their death? Her heart pounded in her chest.

It suddenly reminded her of how hard she had tried to break open the back door in their shop. The shop that had burned down with her parents still trapped inside. Flashes of fire and pain ran through her mind.

This wasn't her home. Nothing there belonged to her.

She took a step back in disbelief. How



could she be so stupid? Just because time passed didn't mean that she could forget all that had happened. Just because she was no longer suffering nightmares about that tragic night didn't mean that it hadn't taken her family away from her.

It wasn't her home. Though it was large and though the Reaves treated her kindly, she knew that nothing there was hers. No matter how much it felt like home.

She had been a fool. A fool pretending to live a life that wasn't hers. It would never be hers. Samantha closed her eyes against the world, sobered by the lies she had been living. Though she knew her parents would want her to be happy, she couldn't help but be ashamed that she had forgotten them so easily.

"Oh, Samantha." She jerked her head up. Paula was smiling at her, urging her inside the kitchen. "Good morning, dear. I didn't see you standing there. Shall we start on the porridge? And afterwards, we'll need to set up a list of items to pick up at the general store. We'll be making a trip into town."

Mr. Reaves cleared his throat. "Tomorrow. You said Jensen has his suit fitting?"

"Hm? Ah. Yes, I had forgotten about that." His wife nodded before turning back to Samantha. "Let's get to work, shall we?"

Samantha took a step forward, stealing her emotions. There wasn't time to dwell on her thoughts so heatedly. Instead, she would need to think carefully. She had let Jensen become too much of a distraction. Every time she started to think up ideas on what she could do bring her parents justice, he came back with that charming smile.

Just thinking about him made her start to melt.

Samantha shook her head. She had to think about her parents. Paula set her up with the dough, and stiffly, she began to knead it. It was a simple task that didn't require too much thinking. Her mind wandered as she prayed

someone good had put out the fire in their store. And she hoped her parents had been given a nice headstone.

She paused, breathless. They would have graves. And a funeral. They would have had a funeral. Everyone deserved one. Except that if they had had one, then that meant her parents had been put to rest before she'd gotten to say goodbye. She hadn't been able to go to any funeral.

Samantha swallowed hard. The nausea hadn't gone away.

"Dear?" Paula paused on the other side of the table and cocked her head. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes," Samantha replied quickly. She forced a smile. "Only tired, I suppose."

The woman tutted. "You've been doing far too much. Why don't you return to bed for a few hours? Just to rest," she added as Samantha began to protest. "There are no

pressing matters today. I'm going to need your help tomorrow, which means I need you in full health. Think of this as my personal need, if you must. I want you in bed today so I can have your energy tomorrow. Go on, then, child."

Paula wouldn't take no for an answer. Ushered out of the kitchen, Samantha returned to her room. She didn't feel tired--simply distressed. She didn't know what she was doing anymore. Though she knew she needed to stop Corley, she wasn't certain how.

Besides, she had to be careful. If he caught wind of her being alive, what would he do?

She didn't want to know the answer. Samantha shuddered and climbed under her blankets for warmth.

He couldn't win. She knew that much. All she needed was a plan. She had to learn where he was, what he knew, and if anyone else knew it had been him. Clearly, he'd had help. But from who?

Questions plagued her as she closed her eyes. Samantha let out a heavy sigh and tried to think.

But even as she attempted to formulate a plan, she couldn't stop thinking of her parents—and if they had wound up with grave markers.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Seven

“Are you certain?” Jensen asked.

Though he didn’t mind trips into town with his mother, he had been hoping Samantha would join them. She had only been to town once and looked like she could use something to cheer her up.

It was like she was trying to hide under a rock again, squirreling herself away and saying little. His mother had mentioned the other morning when he didn’t find Samantha in the kitchen that the young lady wasn’t feeling well. Jensen had tried not to worry, but hoped to at least spend some time with her in the evening after all their work was done.

But Samantha had finished supper and scurried to her room without saying a thing. He had tried to catch her eye during supper,



but she had merely shaken her head. Jensen worried he had done something to hurt her and now searched her face for any such clues.

“I am.” She nodded, staring at the floor. “Besides, time with your mother would be nice, I’m sure.”

He shrugged. “Well, yes. She’s my mother and I always enjoy her company. But I thought you might like a chance to, I don’t know, find some ribbons? You could help me with my suit fitting. Not like... well, provide your input.”

Awkwardness settled between them. Jensen swallowed hard, wishing he hadn’t said that. Said any of that. They hadn’t talked about his upcoming nuptials, besides that one afternoon in the hall where she had nearly collapsed in his arms.

Samantha took a deep breath before meeting his gaze. The little spark of hope he had vanished when she pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Thank you for the invitation, Jensen. But I don’t think that would be appropriate. We... we should be

focused on the wedding. It's next week, is it not?"

"Well, yes..." He had been trying hard not to think about it.

"And besides, I promised Paula I would work on tonight's supper," she told him pointedly. Samantha shifted in the doorway of her room. "You should go now, without me. I appreciate the consideration, but it's not a good idea."

She was still kind, even when she was denying him. Jensen swallowed hard and sighed as he realized he wasn't going to win this battle. Disappointed, he forced himself to nod in defeat.

"I understand," he told her at last. "We will see you this evening, then."

Samantha nodded in return. "Tonight. When you see your mother, tell her I'll be out in just a moment." Then she closed the door before he could say anything more.

Jensen was left standing in front of the door. He tried not to be bothered by her actions, reminding himself that she'd recently been through trauma. She was expected to struggle. And she had pointed out the wedding—his wedding. That had made him uncomfortable. Only then did he realize that she might feel the same. She wasn't part of the family; she was just a weary wanderer taking refuge in his home.

Which meant there would soon come a day where she wasn't there.

His heart skipped a beat. How could he forget? Feeling his throat grow dry, Jensen rubbed the back of his neck and scrambled to reassure himself that such a thing would never happen. That he wouldn't lose Samantha.

And yet, he was supposed to be married in just eight days.

“There you are, Jensen.”

His mother stood at the end of the hall, tying her bonnet on. Giving him a pointed look, she gestured towards the back door. He knew his mother's mindset: the sooner they left, the sooner they could return. Shooting one final glance towards Samantha's closed door, Jensen sighed and followed his mother out.

Soon, the two of them were driving into town, waving to familiar faces and making their way down to the haberdashery. The shop owner's wife, Mrs. Peats, was a spectacular seamstress and always helped dress up folks for fancy occasions. It was only proper that she made his suit for his wedding day.

"I don't know why I need a new one," Jensen sighed as Mrs. Peats and his mother circled him outside of the dressing room. He felt very much like the prized pig set out at a feast. They just needed an apple for his mouth, and the buttons sewn onto his cuffs. He glanced down, feeling dubious about the new clothes.

The suit was a dark blue, a nice color. But

he couldn't stop fidgeting. It didn't feel right. The shirt collar kept choking him and he didn't feel like he could move. Jensen wondered why his mother was smiling. This had to be a joke. He pulled at his throat again.

“Stop that.” She gave him a stern look.

“But it's tight,” he told her for the third time. “I can hardly breathe.”

Mrs. Peats harrumphed. He glanced at her, but she was still scrutinizing one of his hems, so he wasn't certain her grunt was to him or about him.

His mother looked exasperated. “You look lovely, Jensen. And we already checked the collar. We can fit enough fingers in, so it's not that tight.”

“What about the pants, then?” he tried, reaching out to tug them. A droplet of sweat trickled down his spine as he tried not to wince from his discomfort. The room was much too warm, and he couldn't stop tugging

at the clothes. "See? I could never ride a horse in these, let alone dance. I think we need to start over."

His mother frowned as she crouched to test the width of the pants around his ankle. Jensen wiped his sweaty palms on the jacket as he waited for her to realize the same thing. It wasn't what he had expected.

Of course, he hadn't expected to be getting married in this manner, either. Though he'd been thinking about marriage since he was eighteen, looking for any girl that caught his eye, Jensen hadn't courted anyone until Miss Caroline Corley. Not that he had courted her. They had hardly spent any time together.

And in just eight days, they would be saying vows that promised them a life together. He tugged at the lapels again, as though it might bring fresh air up to his face. The day hadn't felt this warm when they had walked in.

Trying to imagine himself marrying Caroline in this suit only made him more

uncomfortable. As he didn't want to appear ungrateful, Jensen had to fight with the misery as he tugged at the clothes. He wanted to be comfortable when he was getting married. Marriage was an important decision—one he didn't want to mess up.

“Jensen.”

He jerked his head up. “Yes, Mother?”

Paula offered the smallest glimpse of a smile as she gestured at him. “Go change. We're done here.”

They must have finished up their conversation about the fitting while he was lost in his thoughts. Ashamed at not having been present and for acting so childish, Jensen nodded and hurried back to the small dressing room. It was only a few boards and curtains set up at the back of the haberdashery, but it provided enough privacy to retain everyone's modesty.

Jensen staggered out of his wedding

clothes as quickly as possible. He scrambled to present them in their fresh condition to Mrs. Peats before looking around and finding his mother waiting for him by the door. The small woman gave him a nod and waited for him before opening the door outside.

He reached above her to hold the door open, and only once she was out completely did he follow. Fixing his shirtsleeves, he cleared his throat. There was fresh air everywhere, and the sun was shining on his face. Everything felt much better than being in that musty place in those restrictive clothes. He couldn't imagine how the fitting had gone so terribly, but he was certain his mother would resolve it. She could make anything happen.

“Let's take a walk,” Paula decided.

It was an innocent enough statement, but a knot formed in his stomach. He recognized that tone. She had used it to weasel every secret he and his brother had ever tried to keep, from Christmas presents to eating too many apples before supper. Jensen grimaced



before hurrying after her.

“It’s a lovely day,” he offered after a moment of silence. It was making him antsy, the way she hadn’t said anything.

Paula waved to Mr. Peats, who was returning to his store with food for his wife, and nodded to the barber, Mr. Smith, at his window. She took her time walking beside him and didn’t look at him. Finally, she spoke. “You think your wedding clothes are too tight.”

It was a statement and not a question. Jensen furrowed his brow as he tried to decide if that was supposed to be a trick. He waved to the pastor on the other side of the street before he nodded. “Yes, Mother. That’s what I was saying. They didn’t fit right. At least, not like these clothes do.” He patted his shirt. “They need to be let out.”

“No, they don’t.” Her voice was crisp and short.

Short enough that it caught him off-guard. He wavered, falling him a step behind her. She kept walking, so he hurried up and glanced at her. It was hard to tell if she was not having a good day. She'd been happy enough that morning. But he couldn't sort out if he was in trouble or had caused trouble.

"You're mad at me?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "No, Jensen." Her voice was a little gentler. "I'm not upset with you."

He took her arm as they crossed the road and stepped over into the shade as they passed the general store. "Then I don't understand. You're not calling me a liar. They really were too tight."

"They fit you just fine," his mother reiterated. "Just like the rest of your clothes. I'm still the one who washes them, aren't I? I assure you, they're the same. Those clothes are not too tight. But there is a chance they are uncomfortable."

Jensen was still confused. His mother was speaking in riddles. “That’s what I said,” he pointed out. “I can’t wear them for the wedding.”

They stopped before the stables as a wagon rolled out. Paula took the chance to turn to him with a furrowed brow. He turned as well, waiting for her to explain whatever it was that she was thinking. The woman was usually right, but she didn’t always speak plainly.

“Are you more uncomfortable with the clothing?” She cleared her throat. “Or with the wedding?”

He stared at her. His heart hammered. Jensen bit his tongue, because he was worried about what might happen if he didn’t. After a brief glance at the ground to think, he looked back at her, but she hadn’t budged.

Jensen didn’t know how to answer. His mind wandered back to Miss Caroline Corley,

then off to Miss Samantha Loche. Then he thought of his father. He shrugged as he sighed. They did have something to talk about, after all.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Eight

The ride home was tense and quiet.

Jensen's brow was furrowed as he concentrated on the road. Paula's hands were free, but she kept them clasped together and stared down at them. They had been able to do so much for her and her family. Her hands had fed them, raised them, and cared for them.

But they couldn't do everything.

Paula had denied the truth for as long as she could. But the moment Jensen started tugging at his clothes, she knew. She knew the truth, and she knew she couldn't keep denying it. Nor could she let her son do the same.

"I don't know Caroline," Jensen had confided in her as they walked. The two of

them paused for a quiet moment in the stables to pet the horses. She offered a few sugar cubes to the creatures and wished she could provide something sweet for her son as well. A sweet solution, a token, something. “I didn’t think I would mind. I want to be married; I want to have a family. I respect you and Father, and the life that you’ve given me.

“I want it, I do. But with Caroline?” He shrugged.

Silence filled the empty space. Paula looked for something to say, but she couldn’t find the words. She wanted Jensen to be married so he could experience the joys that she’d been blessed with over the last twenty-six years.

Marriage came with its hardships. She had experienced many of them, endured and embraced them. There were always going to be challenges. The difference between Paula and her son, however, was that she had chosen the person she had married. Not everyone had agreed with her choice, but she had known Angus for who he was and who he



could be, and she had never regretted that decision.

Now, she and her husband were giving Jensen the opportunity for marriage. But they had stolen that decision from him.

When Angus had first proposed the idea, Paula thought it sounded well enough. It was time Jensen settled down. But she hadn't expected her husband to accelerate the timeline like he had. And she had also expected him to introduce Jensen to the girl before presenting him with the idea. She hadn't anticipated that he would assign the upcoming nuptials as a chore to be weathered.

Though the Corleys were fine enough people, even if they would never be her favorite neighbors, Paula had been ready to accept a life connected with them. She trusted her husband to do what was right for the family. Of late, however, she was no longer certain. The Corleys were rarely clear or as neighborly as she had hoped they would be. But that was forgivable. What would not be forgivable was if Paula sent her firstborn son

to marry someone he didn't love.

When she asked him, he wasn't certain if he even liked her.

Paula was reminded of this as she stepped into her kitchen, where Samantha was bustling about with an apron on and her hair a mess. Her eyes sparkled as she darted about the room, mixing and moving utensils and food as necessary. It almost looked as though the young woman were dancing. Paula took a moment to watch her, heart softening, as she wondered what to do.

The Corleys would be arriving soon. They had tidied the house that morning and kept the open rooms clean and aired out. Soon, there would be a feast on the table where the two families would be sitting around to eat and talk.

After all, there were wedding plans to finalize. Paula licked her lips as she imagined telling her husband that the wedding had to be canceled. He was eager to have the union sealed, speaking frequently of everything that

Mr. Corley had already done to support his business ventures and future growth of the ranch. What would happen if they called off the wedding?

“Mrs. Reaves? The squash is nice and tender. I’ll have it wrapped soon, along with the potatoes. The pie is cooling, and I’ve already cut up the fruit. I hope you don’t mind that I tossed it all into one bowl. My... my mother used to do the same thing. And then I have water on the table already. Mrs. Reaves? Paula?”

She blinked. “Wonderful, Samantha. Thank you.”

The young woman studied her before rolling her sleeves back up to scoop raw honey into another jar. She was a hard worker. Though she talked little of her past, Paula knew there had been a family general store that she had helped run for many years. Her parents must have been wonderful people if they were able to raise such a hard worker. Most of the work had been done while the young lady was on her own.

But the girl wasn't used to being alone. She wasn't used to this ranch, nor their family. Paula knew they had touched on the subject of her eventually leaving, but they had never expanded much on that conversation. Samantha needed time to heal and recover from her grief.

Yet the pain would never fade. Paula knew that much.

Her heart went out to the girl. She knew what it was like to leave one's parents behind. Though she had done so upon marrying Angus, a separation like that tore a person from their childhood. It was a raw ache in the soul when one lost someone close.

And now who did she have?

Jensen hadn't said it in so many words, but it had been clear during their conversation earlier that day that he had been thinking about Samantha. He spent every free minute with her. And if Paula's assumptions were

correct, they'd been on several more walks and adventures without anyone's knowledge. It was almost impressive how rebellious his actions were, for he'd never done anything like that in his life.

"Samantha?" Paula drew over to the table as she grabbed her other apron.

The girl glanced over. "Yes?"

"Why don't you wash up? Miss Caroline and her parents will be here within the hour. I'm afraid I'm as fresh as I'm going to be for this evening. Go on, then, take a break. You've done so much more than I could have expected."

Samantha hesitated. "Are you certain? I don't want to abandon you."

She chuckled. "Like I abandoned you all day? Nonsense, there's no need to worry. Besides, you deserve a break. Go on, then."

The young woman was convinced, though

reluctant. She pulled her hands free. It gave Paula a chance to notice the circles growing under her eyes, and she wondered how much the child was sleeping. After Samantha washed up, she gave Paula a grateful nod and wandered down the hall.

And there she was, on her own.

Just the way she wanted it. This time alone would give Paula a chance to think. She wanted to create a solution that benefitted every party, but it felt like she was a game where she didn't have all of the cards. Especially when it came to Samantha. Though the girl was sweet, Paula wondered what she thought of Jensen. Did she join him for the walks to be polite? It seemed impossible to Paula that Samantha wouldn't be interested in Jensen, but anything could happen. Or not happen. Jensen could have feelings for her and perhaps she didn't return them.

Or perhaps she did.

Paula didn't know. There were too many cards in her deck. As she finished preparing

supper in the kitchen, she tried to find a solution. But soon she was washing up and could hear horses in the yard. They made a loud racket upon their arrival.

The Corleys were here early.

She pushed back her annoyance as she dried her hands on a towel. Pulling off the apron, she was relieved to see Angus fixing his tie in the hallway. Once she reached him, they opened the door together.

“Welcome,” her husband called. “Come in, come in. It’s been too long.”

Paula stepped out onto the porch to take Mrs. Corley’s extravagant parasol. It was very lovely, though she wasn’t certain if anything that nice ever appeared around town. Nothing quite matched up to it.

“It’s wonderful to have you here again,” she forced herself to say. “Please, right this way.”

Angus went down the steps to Mr. Corley, leaving her with the women. "Let's get these horses some feed, Corley. I was talking to Tom Gardener at the livery stables and..."

"Men," Mrs. Corley announced with a shake of her head as she stomped her way inside. "They're always talking about the most horrid topics. Horse feed and whips and tobacco. My, it's nice to be around another woman. Shall we step into your parlor?"

Paula bit her tongue before forcing her smile to widen. "Certainly, ma'am." She led the way, opening the doors for the women. Before she entered the room herself, she noticed movement in the hall. "Samantha! There you are. Join us, would you?"

Hopefully, having some more favorable company that evening would make supper more bearable.

Samantha peeked her head around the corner, hesitating. "Are you certain you want me there?"



“Of course.” Paula nodded, urging her over. “That is, every guest in my home is welcome here. You can meet Jensen’s bride. Ladies, I’d like to introduce our house guest, Miss Samantha Loche. She’s from the neighboring town. Samantha, this is Mrs. Corley and Miss Caroline Corley.”

She was about to close the door behind Samantha, but the girl stopped dead in her tracks. Her hands fell at her side as she stiffened. Paula was forced to pause, and she glanced up at the girl with a concerned frown. It wasn’t the politest movement to stop in a doorway. One must be either inside or out.

But the expression on the young woman’s face made her reconsider her train of thought. Samantha suddenly looked terrible. Paula noticed the slight trembling in her hands and wondered what had happened.

“I’m sorry.” Miss Caroline cleared her throat. “What was your name again?”

“Samantha Loche. But...” The girl grabbed Paula’s arm. She glanced over and let go, only to grab hold of the door frame instead. Paula opened her mouth to ask what was going on when Samantha asked faintly, “Do you mind if I step out? I’d like to check on the kitchen.”

She was gone before anyone could say anything. Paula stared, bewildered, when Mrs. Corley interrupted the quiet.

“You’ve hired help, then? Isn’t that nice? We had a wonderful maid back in Chicago. But you see, there is little good help out here. And yet, all the more need for someone—dust gets everywhere.”

Paula wanted to go see what had happened to Samantha, but she knew what it meant to be a hostess. She couldn’t be rude, especially since this relationship mattered so much to Angus. Swallowing her frustration, she moved forward and took a seat to join the conversation. There would be time to make sense of everything later.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Nine

Jensen could hear the horses coming in and delayed going inside.

His plan to spend as little time as possible with the Corleys nearly worked as he hid in the barn. The voices of his father and Mr. Corley grew louder and louder. He paused beside Dog and grimaced. The horse blew air in his face, as though telling him to behave.

“Fine,” Jensen sighed.

He inhaled and then let out the breath back in Dog’s face. The horse huffed, and Jensen left the pen. He straightened his shirt, ran a hand through his hair, and forced himself to wave when the older men arrived at the barn door.

“Ah!” Mr. Corley called out. “There’s the

man of the hour! Or, rather, you will be. What are you doing out here? My Caroline is already inside. I'm sure she's waiting for you. Why don't you head on up? Your old man and I have some business to take care of."

It wasn't even a proper greeting. His father shrugged and waved him off, so Jensen offered a slight nod and trooped toward the house. He glanced around for Mitchell, wondering where his brother was. He couldn't remember if he was expected at supper or not. Jensen turned to the house warily.

"There's no time like the present," he mumbled.

Jensen already felt drained from his afternoon with his mother. What was supposed to have been an enjoyable day in town had turned into a lengthy conversation about his future. Part of him still wasn't sure what had been said, only that there was a small weight off his shoulders, now that his mother had listened to him.

And yet, nothing had changed.

That became clear to him as he reached the dining room. There, he found his mother seated with the Corley women. Mrs. Corley beamed at him as he crossed the threshold, starting in her seat. She wore so many pearls that they clacked together when she moved. Then there was her daughter, sitting across from her. Caroline was yawning.

She did look lovely. Even if he didn't like her that much.

Jensen hesitated. He hadn't thought something rude like that in a long time. Swallowing, he forced a smile and a wave. "Good evening, Mrs. Corley. And Miss Caroline."

"Come join us," his mother invited. "Supper is ready. As soon as the other men return, we'll begin. We were just talking about the weather. Join us, and we can talk about the harvest."

It wasn't the most interesting topic, but

Jensen wanted to be polite. He nodded and stood behind his chair. Standing, he could more easily tap his foot and look around the room. The conversation didn't hold his attention well, but he tried. It took more concentration than anything else had lately until he heard his father's footsteps on the back porch.

"There you are," Jensen called. "It's about time."

His father chuckled. "Hungry young man, aren't you? Can't blame you for that. You get that appetite from me. Let's all gather around. Supper smells wonderful, dear."

Everyone took their seats. Mitchell appeared as Paula chuckled. "Thank you, Angus. But I'm afraid you'll have to thank Samantha. She's the one who prepared this delightful feast. Mitchell, were the lambs all right?"

"Just fine." Mitchell shrugged. "A few of them ate bad grass, but they're fine now."



Jensen nodded as he glanced around the table. He sat between Miss Caroline and his brother. His parents sat on the ends of the table, with Mr. and Mrs. Corley across from him. There was one more seat beside Mrs. Corley with a place set.

Samantha.

“Speaking of Samantha,” Jensen started, glancing up at his mother with a furrowed brow, “where is she? Won’t she be joining us?”

Paula opened her mouth and glanced around the table. “I’m afraid not. She didn’t appear to be feeling well. She’ll rest in her room, and I’ll bring her a plate of food later.”

“Oh?” His brow furrowed deeper. Jensen remembered how little she had talked to him that morning, as well as the day before. While he knew she was suffering in ways he didn’t understand, it worried him that she was all alone and not eating. “Should someone check on her?” He put his hands on the table, ready

to get up.

Angus cleared his throat. "I'm sure she'll be fine. I'll say grace and then we can eat. Paula can see to her later."

Jensen let out a slow breath as he nodded. "Right, of course." He shouldn't have said anything. He put on a smile and clasped his hands in his lap as his father spoke again. Once the prayer was finished, everyone tucked into dinner.

"So, who is this Samantha?" Mr. Corley asked as he chewed.

"Oh, she's a darling young lady who is staying here as our house guest," Paula spoke up with a vibrant smile. "Miss Samantha Corley. She's been wonderful to have around here as company. Actually, sir, you might know of her. She just came from Reidsfield."

Jensen struggled to get a potato chunk on his fork, frowning as the man across from him coughed suddenly. "I-I can't say I have.

Having company is a... a swell treat. That's mighty nice of you to have her, erm, here. Will she be staying long?"

This time, Jensen's father answered. "Not long. She'll be on her way soon enough, I'm sure."

The conversation around the table wandered in another direction, but Jensen couldn't keep track any longer. He attempted to focus on his food, but he couldn't find an appetite. He paused and glanced around the table.

His brother was fastidious as ever, focused on his plate and hardly paying attention to anything else. Miss Caroline was the opposite. She hardly touched her food as her eyes darted about the table to everyone who spoke. Yet she had hardly given him a glance.

Was this how it would always be? Jensen wondered. The two of them not talking. Just listening to their parents talk for them. The thought of spending the rest of his life with someone who would barely look at him made

his stomach churn. All he wanted to do in that moment was tell Caroline that he wouldn't marry her. Tell everyone that he couldn't marry her.

“Jensen?”

He blinked and realized he had stood up. He opened his mouth, but as he looked at his father's inquisitive face, he knew he couldn't say what was on his mind. He couldn't tell Caroline that he found her annoying and didn't care to ever see her again. Just as he considered taking his seat, an itch arose up his spine and he couldn't stay there a minute longer.

“We need more tea,” he announced, looking around and grabbing the pitcher. It was still halfway full. But the container was dark, so they wouldn't know.

His mother frowned at him. “Are you sure? Then I shall get it. Take a seat, Jensen.”

But he shook his head. “No, please, allow

me.”

Jensen left the table, fleeing into the kitchen. Taking a deep breath, he shook his head once he was alone. With no one around, he felt he could breathe again. All he needed was a moment of peace. A door separated him from the dining room, so all the voices were muffled. He took another deep breath.

When his eyes opened again, he found the doorway to the hall partially filled. Samantha was standing there. She had her hand on the wall and stared at him in surprise. Her eyes hadn't looked so big since the night they met.

He stared back. She seemed rather pale. And her hands were shaking. Jensen forgot the rest of the world as he hurried over.

“Samantha,” he murmured, “how are you? Are you ill?”

She took a step back as her hands dropped from the wall to wrap around herself. “No. I mean yes. I mean... what are you doing? You

should be at supper.”

“As should you,” he reminded her.

She shook her head at the idea. “No. It... it’s not my place. I shouldn’t. I can’t.”

“But—”

“I can’t,” she repeated herself, cutting him off. Her voice broke and it surprised both of them. Confused, Jensen tried to read her face. There was obviously something wrong, but she didn’t appear ready to tell him anything. He put out a hand but when she took a step back, he grudgingly dropped it.

“Tonight?” Jensen asked after silence had settled between them. “A stroll. Some fresh air.”

Samantha swallowed with difficulty. “I don’t know, Jensen, I...”

“Please,” he begged her.

The more he looked at her, the more his heart ached. Jensen found himself wishing he could stay by her side instead of returning to supper. But he was beginning to remember everyone else in the next room, and he knew someone would come for him soon. He couldn't just disappear without a better reason than tea.

He wanted to be with her. To talk to her. And it was time he told her how he felt. But Jensen wanted to do it properly. The realization washed over him so softly that he wasn't scared by the idea. Rather, he was hopeful. Whatever was going on with Samantha, he would do anything he could to help her. She meant more to him than he even understood.

Samantha took a step back when they heard the creak of the door behind him. "Tonight, then," she murmured and disappeared.

"Jensen?"

He whirled around to see his mother standing there, wearing a slight frown. Jensen still didn't wish to join them at supper. He wasn't even hungry.

But now that he had evening plans for later, his unease about the awkward dinner fell away. It would end eventually. All he had to do was survive it so he could talk to Samantha later.

His hope for the evening stroll made the meal much more bearable. He returned to the room with his mother and managed to smile and join in discussions about the ranch, a future he didn't care for, and other polite conversation.

Then, everyone moved to the parlor for more tea and talk--another tedious task to be completed as the hosts. Jensen could hardly sit still. The wives discussed wedding details as the men discussed horses. And, finally, the Corleys were gone.

It was another two hours before his family decided to retire for the evening. He didn't



want to make everyone suspicious, especially since his mother had mentioned he needed to be more delicate about his situation.

Jensen could hardly stand it as he waited in the hall for Samantha. Part of him worried she wouldn't come out, that she might pretend to sleep in an effort to continue avoiding him. His heart pounded so hard he thought it would escape his chest. It made him breathless as he knocked quietly on Samantha's door and led her out into the moonlight.

As though she understood, they hurried down the trail to be further away from the house before speaking a word. He wondered if he should mention his conversation with his mother, but decided against it. Still, he did want to talk to her about how he felt.

Jensen was preparing himself to make his case to Samantha when she abruptly turned to him and spoke first.

“Vance Corley murdered my parents.”





# Chapter Thirty

She didn't mean to blurt the words out.

But Samantha couldn't contain her fears anymore. Not since the moment Paula had introduced her to the two women. When Paula had announced their names, Samantha felt like someone had hit her over the head. No one had mentioned the last name of the family that Jensen was marrying into.

Not until that very moment.

When she looked at the young woman who Jensen was bound to marry, she could see it. Caroline Corley had her father's hard gaze. Though she'd only met the man once, that had been enough. She would never forget the vicious look he had given her on his way out of the store. It had made her uneasy for days, until her father had convinced her to stop worrying.

And then her parents had died. She had

nearly died.

Fear had wrapped her in its grasp, and it had taken all of her strength to turn away and run down the hall. Samantha had escaped into the kitchen to catch her breath. She'd leaned over the counter and closed her eyes, fighting to control the panic.

Her entire body shook as she recalled that terrifying night. Samantha remembered every fearful moment. The terror and pain upon realizing she had just lost her parents. The quaking fear as she recognized that she had to flee. The difficulty of returning to her house and then disappearing back into the night. The hours and hours of walking and running and hiding.

Nowhere was safe. Even after taking the wrong direction and winding up even farther away from Baker's Creek, Samantha still wasn't safe.

Vance Corley and his family were right there at the house.

Her hands balled into fists as she tried to tell herself to calm down--to stop worrying and to do something. But what? She could hardly think. Every time she inhaled, she had to bite her tongue to keep the sobs at bay.

She hiccupped. She couldn't stop herself. Putting a hand over her mouth, Samantha closed her eyes and tried to calm down. Falling apart would do her no good now. She had to do something. She couldn't stand here all night.

“Oh, you poor thing.”

Samantha jumped as Paula touched her arm. The woman gave her a comforting squeeze. She appeared blurrily before Samantha, forcing her to realize there were tears filling her eyes. Hurriedly she scrubbed them away and tried to smile. Even if her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

“I-I'm sorry,” she choked out. “But I don't... I don't feel well.”

How could she tell Paula the truth? She was terrified of facing Mr. Corley, let alone telling the Reaves the truth she had yet to share with anyone. There was always the chance they wouldn't believe her. Or they might address Mr. Corley for his defense, and then what? Wouldn't they believe their son's future father-in-law over herself?

Or what if they believed her, and Mr. Corley set the house on fire?

Samantha bit her tongue as the fear tightened its grasp on her heart. Even the hug that Paula gave her didn't bring the usual comfort she dearly wished it could provide.

"You poor thing. Come then, to bed. What is it? How can I help?"

The way Paula ran a hand through her hair to soothe her made Samantha cry harder. It was exactly what her mother had done for her when things were difficult. She shook her head as the two of them made their way down

the hall.

“My leg,” she stammered. “The burn. That’s all.”

After the excuse came out of her mouth, she knew it wasn’t a good lie. But it was the first thing she could think of. They reached her room and Paula helped her sit. “May I?” The woman gestured to her leg.

Blinking away tears, Samantha forced herself to nod. She sniffed and managed to choke out another lie. One that would explain the tears. “I banged it. On the stool.”

Paula nodded as she untucked the bandage to check on the injury. Her hands were delicate and swift, checking for new bruising. “It’s still blistering, I’m afraid. We didn’t apply new ointment today, did we? Yes, a blister has popped. That must be it.”

That was pure luck. Samantha wasn’t about to complain, though she hated lying. All she wanted to do was scream and tell Paula to



run for safety. To grab the men and flee. To escape from the Corleys as quickly as possible. But she didn't know how to explain.

"I just don't feel well." Samantha shook her head when the woman asked if she still wanted to join them for supper. "I don't think I could eat."

The woman's brow furrowed but she didn't object. Paula nodded and gave Samantha a tight squeeze before stepping back. "I'll check on you after supper, then."

And then she was alone. Samantha paced in every corner of the room. She rubbed her hands and her arms and neck as she tried to think. She had to strategize. Surely there was something she could do. But her stomach flopped, and her hands wouldn't stop shaking. When she'd run into Jensen after sneaking into the kitchen to quench her thirst, she had almost confided in him.

There had been so many opportunities for her to tell him. Even before that day. And when she'd accepted his invitation for a walk,

Samantha had known she would have to confess everything to him. She prayed that he would understand and that he would believe her.

She hadn't meant to unload the information on him so quickly and without warning.

Her eyes studied Jensen after the words slipped out of her mouth. Samantha wrapped her arms around her waist as she prayed once more that he would believe her.

Vance Corley had murdered her parents.

Jensen's mouth hung open as he stared. The words sunk in slowly. Then his eyes moved around, studying her face. Her chin wobbled just as he put out his arms and grabbed her by the shoulders. She jumped lightly but forced herself not to move.

"What do you mean?" he asked her. "Are you certain?"

He was clearly blindsided. As she filled in the missing pieces of her story, he staggered back in disbelief. But she had gone too far to quit, so she kept talking. She explained how she had met Corley only once, what her parents said of the man, and recounted the fire.

Samantha had tears trickling down her cheeks as she finished the story. Her hands were clasped before her as though in prayer, hoping Jensen would believe everything she said. It was a big risk. He was supposed to be marrying the man's daughter, after all, and Jensen was a kind man who hardly had anything cruel to say about anyone. Would he believe her?

Silence stole her voice when she ran out of words. She waited.

He stood there, staring at her hands as he processed her revelation. He licked his lips. And then, he covered her hands with his.

"I believe you," he assured her at last.

Relief rippled through her. She could feel her knees wobbling. It took all of her strength not to fall over. A gasp escaped her mouth as she pulled his hands close and kissed them in gratitude. It happened before she even registered what she was doing. Though her cheeks began to heat up, Samantha tried to set aside any embarrassment. "Thank you, Jensen. Thank you."

"It's about money," he said next.

She paused to consider what he was suggesting. She gulped. And then she nodded. When Mr. Corley hadn't repaid the loan, when her father had asked for the money, the shop had burned. The man had preferred to kill rather than pay back what he owed.

Samantha nodded as she wondered why he was thinking about the money. He answered the question she didn't ask aloud.

"That's why he wants this marriage." He nodded, absently running one of his thumbs

across Samantha's hands. "I couldn't figure out what he was going to get out of this partnership. My father wanted the connections, and... Mr. Corley must want money. We have one of the most successful ranches in the territory and I'm the only...."

Her heart pounded in her chest. "I'm sorry," she offered, worried about his thoughts on why he had been picked for the marriage. She knew he never wanted to talk about the marriage or the woman he was supposed to wed.

Jensen shook his head after his eyes focused on her. "Don't be sorry," he told her. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Samantha. I should have been able to do more, to do something to protect you. And now, we..."

"What?" She stepped closer, closing the gap between them. Her heart pounded as she waited for him to do something. Anything. Surely there was something they could do. But the panic held her so tightly, she knew she couldn't think straight enough to devise a plan.

The handsome young man before her inhaled. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But we’re going to figure it out.”







# Chapter Thirty-One

Jensen opened his eyes to find sunlight streaming into his room.

He had slept in. No one had woken him up. He furrowed his brow but couldn't convince himself to climb out of bed just yet. His body ached with exhaustion. As last night's conversation flooded back, his limbs grew too weary to move.

Samantha. She was in danger..

But he wasn't certain how to help. A sigh escaped his lips as he tried to imagine what she was feeling and thinking. After all, she wasn't home. This wasn't her house or her family. He tried to imagine losing his parents and brother. To have to run from home and never look back.

His jaw locked as he thought about the tears flooding down her cheeks. His arms felt empty now that he was no longer holding her

for comfort and safety. As she had cried last night, Jensen had tried to support her in any way that he could. It didn't feel like much. But he wanted to do anything that he could for her.

She had been embarrassed in telling him. Samantha had apologized over and over in his arms, laughing nervously through her tears. It made his chest tighten even hours later as he remembered the anger and frustration flooding through his body. It felt like there was so little he could do.

"I'm sorry," she'd murmured, shaking her head. Her nose brushed against his chest several times. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I didn't want to ruin anything for you. Or your family. After everything you've done for me, I don't want to hurt anyone."

That was what she was worrying about, instead of her own safety. Jensen considered how he had tightened his grip around her, never wanting to let Samantha go.

"It wasn't an accident?" he recalled asking

her. His mind was piecing together everything that had happened, trying to make sure he understood every step. If he did, then there had to be something he could do.

Her hands had wrapped over her mouth to hold back the sobs. “No,” she had choked out eventually. “It was murder. I was supposed to die too”

Jensen’s grip tightened on his blankets. He wondered how he had let go of her. Left her to go to her room and stay on her own. It wasn’t proper to spend so much time together unsupervised, especially in the evening. He knew how wrong it would appear even to his family to keep watch over Samantha to make sure she remained safe. He knew he couldn’t, but it didn’t cancel out the urge to protect her.

He thought about doing it now. Going to her, seeing if she was awake. Wrapping her up in his arms and assuring her nothing would happen. Jensen opened his eyes again to glance toward his window. The light of day shone through, reminding him he couldn’t hide anything.

With a sigh, he shook his head. He had to be more responsible. But how? This was uncharted territory. Licking his lips, he thought about the rest of their conversation. If Vance Corley had done something so terrible to her family, then they needed all the facts and the proof of the crime to make sure they found her justice.

Justice. He had promised he would help her. That had helped to dry her tears as she'd realized that she was no longer alone.

Vance Corley. Jensen tried to think about what he knew about the man.

But the more he thought about it, the more he realized how little he actually knew. Corley had a wife and daughter. They had moved from Chicago. He'd been a businessman and an investor in other companies. The man needed more money for his investments, which he was looking to gather from Angus Reaves, and would provide connections for potential business and additional investments in return.

There was a wife who prioritized worldly possessions. And there was a daughter who missed Chicago.

And that was everything Jensen could recall about the Corley family.

He swallowed, finally moving his limbs to rub his face. Jensen sat up to collect his strength for the day. It already felt like it was going to be a long one. He'd hoped that his drive to support Samantha would give him more than enough energy, but that hadn't happened. Not yet, anyways.

Then, realizing he could do something, Jensen slipped out of his bed and knelt beside it. He inhaled as he gripped his hands together and bowed his head to pray. Of course, that was what he needed to do. The Lord would guide him and give him the strength he needed. The Lord would show him how he could support Samantha and fix this for her.

He was going to help. He knew that. He

just didn't know how.

But he would do anything to keep his promise to Samantha.

Jensen prayed for several minutes before clambering up to his feet. A weight lifted off his shoulders as he shaved and dressed for the day. His heart skipped a beat when he reached the kitchen and paused in the doorway to see his mother and Samantha there, holding a quiet conversation.

Samantha answered a question Jensen hadn't heard his mother ask. "I was just thinking about how delightful the kitchen smells. Cinnamon is my favorite spice, I think." The smile she wore looked forced.

His mother nodded, looking at the girl. Jensen knew that look. His heart hammered as he watched. That look on his mother's face was much too familiar. Paula knew something. But what? He hesitated in the shadows, wondering if she knew about the walk last night. Or perhaps she knew what had happened to Samantha's parents?

“Cinnamon is a lovely spice.” Paula smiled as she talked. “It really is wonderful having you here, Samantha. I do hope that... that you’ve been comfortable in our home. That you’ve felt safe.”

Jensen swallowed hard as Samantha turned away. His heart went out to her, knowing that she had enjoyed her time with the family but was in danger now. How could she possibly feel safe anymore? He gritted his teeth.

But Samantha nodded. She put on a brave face that Jensen was learning to recognize through her smiles. “Of course, Paula. You’ve treated me so well. You must know how grateful I am for all that you’ve done for me.”

His mother walked over to her. “I’ve done my best. And if you thought there was something I should know, you would tell me, wouldn’t you?”

A shiver ran down his spine. His mother

was a genius. And she would do anything to protect her children. Jensen knew Paula thought of Samantha as one of her own. As Samantha opened her mouth, he could have sworn he could see the confession on her lips.

But then it was gone. The tense moment faded as Samantha shrugged. “Of course, Paula. We’re friends.”

Last night, Jensen had wanted to tell Paula. They could be trusted, he’d assured Samantha, and they would help her. But she had shaken her head, worried that he might already know too much. If he knew the truth, wasn’t he in trouble now, as well as her?

Jensen cleared his throat, and the women noticed him in the doorway. Lifting his gaze, he stepped in as though he had only just appeared. As though he hadn’t heard their conversation. He nodded to his mom and then glanced at Samantha.

The more they had talked and shared



what they knew of the Corleys, he had brought to Samantha's attention that his family managed their financials very well. It only stood to reason that the marriage arranged between him and Mr. Corley's daughter was to grow the man's finances. If his father knew the truth, then he would be very upset. That would help Jensen out of his undesired marriage.

But they needed to be certain. They had both agreed that they couldn't move forward foolishly.

Jensen swallowed, giving her a nod and a smile when she looked up at him. His mother gestured to his seat. Footsteps trailed after him as his father and brother appeared as well. It was time for everyone to eat together. He didn't pay attention to what was being said as his eyes trailed over Samantha. The young woman brought over fresh butter and then took her seat across from him.

Her eyes were still puffy from the night before. But she looked fresh for the day, so he hoped that meant she was feeling comforted

and safe. Jensen prayed she would trust him through this.

“What a delight,” his father boomed. “Dear, you’ve outdone yourself again.”

Jensen watched his mother chuckle as everyone took their seats. “You should save your compliments until you’ve tasted your food, Angus. Say grace, would you? Then you can reconsider your words.”

He obeyed. Grace was said, and Jensen glanced again at the beautiful and scared young woman across from him. There was something new between them. It felt like they were tied together, their hearts and soul. Whenever he glanced up, she did as well. And it was the same when she turned to him.

They were going to survive this together.

“I was thinking about going into town today,” Jensen announced halfway through the meal. An idea had begun to form. His eyes skirted to Samantha. “It’s a good day for a

ride. Do we need anything for the kitchen?"

Her eyes flickered to his. "I can write a list," she offered as she began to catch on. "Perhaps come with you, if... if Paula doesn't need me." She turned to the other end of the table.

"I suppose," his mother started to say.

But then his father interrupted. He cleared his throat as he wiped his mouth clean with his napkin. "Thank you, kids, but I have that under control. I'll be heading into town in a few minutes. Jensen, I want you working on the wheat today. Mitchell will help you. Just hand me a list if anyone needs anything."

The hope in his chest deflated. Though Jensen offered to exchange responsibilities with his father, the man was having none of it. There was business to handle in town, and he didn't need any help. His mother shrugged it off, and he knew he had to do the same. Samantha offered a supportive smile when he sighed.

Tomorrow, then, he supposed. Perhaps tomorrow they could go to town. Jensen thought it would be a good idea to see where the Corleys were staying and who else would know them. He wanted to learn what other people knew about them. And if he'd had help burning down her family's store, they needed to know who it had been.

"Tonight," Jensen mouthed to her when the meal ended, and he had to get to work.

His thoughts churned as he followed Mitchell out into the fields. It was impossible to focus on the ranch when he was leaving Samantha alone without protection. But he couldn't think up a good enough excuse that would keep him there.

No, he told himself, Vance Corley wouldn't try anything so dangerous. To come to a house without the men present would be shameful enough. There was no accident he could fake in that manner. Besides, Jensen's mother would be there for support.

Tomorrow, Jensen assured himself. Now that he knew the truth about what had happened to Samantha and her family, he would bring her justice. Her parents had waited long enough for that.





# Chapter Thirty-Two

Something was different with Samantha.

Paula couldn't place what it was. She had stayed awake late the night before to listen when the young woman and her oldest son returned inside. It was later than usual.

And then, that morning, Samantha's eyes looked a little red. But she was cheerful enough, alert enough that Paula wasn't certain what had happened. Jensen was energetic, and the two of them didn't appear any different when they sat down to eat. If anything, the two of them had acted even closer than usual. But why had Jensen desired to take Samantha into town? Something must have happened.

She tried to think while everyone ate. There was a suspended tension in the room, though it didn't appear that anyone else felt it. Or, if they did, they were good at hiding it.

Paula glanced around the table. Mitchell



was clueless, focused on enjoying every bite of food. Her husband looked distracted. He was pushing around his eggs and she could hear the constant tapping of his foot under the table. Samantha and Jensen kept looking at each other, but she couldn't decipher what any of the looks meant.

An unsettling feeling grew in her stomach. It felt like a black pit that made her consider her words before saying anything. She wanted answers, but she wasn't certain how to receive them. It took hours before Paula turned to Samantha and decided to speak up.

“Samantha?”

The young woman looked up, her eyes wide. She was sitting on her knees and tidying the fireplace, quietly humming a hymn. A strand fell into her face. “Yes?”

Paula watched her from the hallway. “I was just wondering about that—”

But the backdoor burst open to interrupt

her. Paula jumped in surprise, not having heard anyone climb the steps. Samantha looked as surprised as she did.

“Paula?” Angus called. “We need to talk.”

Straightening up, she peeked her head around the corner as she watched her husband struggle to take off his jacket. It took him a minute before he set it on the coat rack alongside his hat. The man adjusted his shirt and then headed to her. His shoulders were back and there was a determined look in his eyes that told her something was about to happen.

Is that what she had been waiting for all morning? The black pit in her stomach churned. She swallowed hard before glancing back into the nearby room at Samantha. The young woman stood up to join her, wondering what was happening.

Angus saw Samantha and stopped short. He hesitated, momentarily dissuaded from the mission he had been focused on just a second ago. Paula glanced between the two of them.

There was something she was missing, something she didn't know. But what could it be?

The older man swallowed. "We need to talk."

"You said that," Paula reminded him, fiddling with her apron. "What is it, dear? Is something wrong?"

First, she worried about her husband. Then her children. Then Samantha. If something was wrong with the ranch or the animals, that would be fine. But about any of the people she cared about, Paula wasn't so certain.

She searched her husband's face for clues. He hesitated, his mouth opening. There were wrinkles there, from years of hard work and laughter. The man had filled out more than the skinny thing she had married so long ago. And his brow was furrowed like he had to take care of difficult business. Though she didn't like the look of it, she trusted Angus to tell her the truth.

His eyes darted between his wife and Samantha. Then he rasped, “Outside. Let’s... we need to talk outside.”

Her smile slipped as she glanced at the young woman beside her. The girl widened her eyes at Paula. But she could only shrug, not knowing what was going on.

“Of course,” she told her husband. She gave Samantha a comforting squeeze first. “Can you please clean the grate as well? I’ll return in just a moment to help you with the floors. They always get rather dusty after a good fireplace cleaning.”

The girl nodded. “Yes, I can do that.” She forced a smile. “Anything I can do to help.”

Paula wanted to reassure the girl that nothing could be wrong. Surely Angus only wanted to talk about their finances or something like that. Something that Samantha didn’t need to worry about. After a quick smile, she turned to her husband, who guided

her outside.

The sun shone in her eyes as she stepped outside. Paula had to squint as she followed her husband. He paused first on the porch and then headed down the steps. Once she followed him, opening her mouth to ask what was going on, he changed his mind and continued down the lane.

“Where are we going?” Paula cleared her throat. “Angus?”

“We’re not... nowhere,” he huffed. He turned to her and then looked away. His shoulders moved as he took another deep breath. Something was weighing on his mind, but he was too wary to say anything.

Trying to be patient, Paula stepped forward and patted his shoulder. “Dear, out with it. What’s wrong? The boys are all right, aren’t they?”

“I haven’t been out there,” he reminded her. “I’ve just come from town.”

“Then nothing can be wrong, so long as we’re all here and safe and healthy,” she pointed out. Shading herself from the hot sun, she sighed. “I’m not certain why you wanted to talk outside. We have a perfectly good house to tend to business. Or whatever matters are sticking to your tongue.”

Angus groaned. “Paula, don’t tease me.”

She gave him a look. “Then don’t act so strange and mysterious. What happened in town? Is it the cattle?” Paula squinted at him in the sunlight, though he stood at an intolerable angle for her to see him just right. But her husband was good at doing silly things like that. A small hindrance that could make her smile.

“Samantha has to leave.”

Her hand dropped down to her side. Paula took two steps to her right to get out of the sun’s way in order to see her husband’s expression better.

His brow was still furrowed as he crossed his arms. He refused to look her in the eye. Paula cocked her head to try and understand where such a statement was coming from. She chanced a glance towards the house before turning back to her husband.

“Oh, really? Why?”

It would have to be a good reason for them to kick a perfectly sweet girl out of their house. She needed shelter and it was their job as Christians to be of service. After everything Samantha Loche had endured, Paula couldn't imagine sending the girl back on her way all alone. She had promised to help the young woman, after all. And she kept her promises.

Angus started to pace but stopped several times as he searched for the right words. “Think about it, Paula. A young woman like her who is staying in a house with two unwed young men? It's improper.”

She hesitated, wondering if that was just

his excuse. They had already talked about this situation and she clearly remembered telling her husband that he didn't have a choice. It was her house and she chose who stayed under their roof.

“Angus.” Paula articulated his name slowly while she crossed her arms against her chest. “Why are you bringing this up again? We decided it was fine. The two of us are there. I’m always at the house. Besides, both of our sons are trustworthy. I know you haven’t spent that much time around Samantha, but I have. She is a wonderful young woman, and she can be trusted as well. Besides, Jensen is to be married soon.”

Her husband raised a finger. “Exactly. He’s going to be married. Why should we have temptation set up before him here and now? The boy should be focusing on his upcoming nuptials. Not eyeing the girl across the table.”

Had he noticed as well? Paula paused to think. Angus was growing jittery, pacing across the path as he fiddled with his hands. He could rarely be still. She sighed, looking



for something to say that would ease his concerns. "Jensen is a good boy. We both know this. If you want him to marry the Corley girl, then he will. Samantha doesn't have anywhere else to go. I promise, she's not staying forever. But surely a few more days, if not a few weeks, should be sufficient. Is that what you're worried about? How long she will stay with us?"

"Yes. No." Angus couldn't make up his mind. He ran a hand through his graying hair and sighed. "It's just not right. She has to go."

"Go where?" Paula spread out her hands. "Are you trying to toss her out onto the road?"

He blanched at the tone she used. "Of course not. No, sweet pea. No. I mean, I wouldn't... no. But she has to go. She has to... she can't stay, Paula. That's what I'm saying."

"Who can't stay?"

Jensen stood at the end of the trail only a few yards away. He, too, squinted in the

sunlight, fiddling with his hat. His horse stood nearby, waiting patiently. When Paula and her husband finally noticed him there, they turned and stared.

Angus glanced at Paula. She shrugged and motioned for Jensen to come and join them. It was a family discussion, was it not? Everyone deserved a say. Or, if anything, perhaps he could talk some sense into his father. Though Paula knew she was risking it, considering she knew how her son felt for Samantha, perhaps he could find the right words to convince his father not to kick a poor young woman out onto the road.

She wasn't panicking yet, but she was concerned. Angus was making little sense. This request had come out of nowhere and she only wished that he was truthful with them.

"Samantha Loche." Her husband straightened up again as he addressed his son. "She can't stay here any longer. It's time for her to leave."

The young man recoiled before turning to

his mother. “She can’t? Mother?”

Sighing, Paula gave her husband a look. “I told you, Angus. No one is going to agree with you about this decision.”

“But I’m the man of the house,” he reminded her.

“My house,” she responded before adding, “And you’re still not making any sense. What happened to you, Angus? I know you may not like Samantha very much, but you’re on the verge of coming across very rudely. It’s not Christian. She needs help and support. The young woman has finally healed from her injuries. And now you would toss her out without a family or a home?”

He started to shake his head and then sighed. Pacing, Angus fixed his shirt and then his pants and then his hair, before heaving another sigh. The man simply could not be still. “It’s not what I want. But it needs to happen. Trust me when I say this. Samantha Loché can’t stay with us any longer.”

“You have to give us a good enough reason why,” Jensen told him. “Did something happen in town, Father? Did someone say something?”

Paula jerked her head over to her son, wondering where the questions had come from. She hadn’t thought about where Angus had been. She frowned at her husband as she waited for him to respond.

The man kept pacing to avoid giving an answer. But it was an answer all on its own.

“Who was it?” Jensen insisted. “Who talked to you about her?”

“That’s not important,” Angus snapped.

His tone surprised both Jensen and Paula. She gave her husband a stern look as she patted her son’s arm. The gesture was noticed by the other man, who realized his mistake.

“That is,” Angus tried, “I don’t want to have make this any harder than it already is. Samantha needs to leave. It’s not right for her to stay so long. We have enough happening on the ranch with the cattle and the upcoming wedding that there just isn’t room for her.”

Paula frowned, shaking her head. “That’s not an acceptable excuse. Angus, out with it. Why do you really need Samantha gone? I told you she was a welcome guest. You have hardly complained since then. The only reason you would be so adamant now is if it came from somewhere else. Or someone else. But who would you listen to over your wife?”

Angus’s face paled.





# Chapter Thirty-

# Three

His mother had asked a good question.

Jensen turned to his father to see how he would answer it. Angus Reaves was a respectable man known well around the territories for his honesty and hard work. And a man like that would treat his wife like a queen.

From his own experience, Jensen knew that his parents always worked things out fairly easily between the two of them. Though his father had not been thrilled at Samantha's arrival, he had consented to his wife's decision to allow the girl to stay with them. He didn't think there had been any concerns since that was made final for the family.

Torn between bewilderment, concern, and fear for Samantha, Jensen swallowed hard as he waited for his father to answer the



question. The shock he had felt upon hearing his parents talk about Samantha was finally fading.

“No one,” Angus started to say while he fiddled with his belt. “Only, with the union to the Corleys coming up soon...”

Something in his stomach sunk at the mention of the name. The Corleys. What did their family really know about them?

He had wanted to go tell his parents after Samantha had confessed her secret. But she had asked him not to, wanting more proof before pulling anyone into her trouble.

Jensen blinked as he remembered how she'd explained her story of that terrible night. It was a blindsiding revelation to learn of the horror. And worse to hear that he knew the man who had committed such a heinous crime. That he had shaken hands with and agreed to marry that criminal's daughter.

When he'd asked her to tell his parents,

she had voiced her concern that she wouldn't be believed. But Samantha hadn't ever lied. She had only protected herself, and Jensen couldn't fault her for that. Nothing she said had changed the way he felt about her.

The only thing he regretted about that night was that after he had let go of her so she could return to her room, Jensen realized he'd never had his chance to tell her how he felt. About the pounding in his heart, the way his eyes always followed her.

Samantha was a beautiful woman, inside and out. He knew he had thought that before and he knew he would think it time and time again. There would never be anyone else for him. Only her.

He had tossed and turned all night, thinking about what could be done.

Then it hit him. If his parents knew how dangerous Mr. Corley was, then Jensen could be freed of the marriage contract and no longer have to marry Caroline. Instead, he could marry Samantha.

If they knew—surely, if they knew—then everything would change. The Corleys wouldn't be trusted. They would be taken to the judge for the crime and Samantha would be safe. And he would be free. Jensen glanced between his parents as he searched for the words. His heart pounded as he considered giving up Samantha's secret.

She had begged him not to. But what if this was the only way for them to be together? For her to find justice for her parents?

As he opened his mouth, however, Angus sighed and ran another hand through his hair.

"Paula." He gritted his teeth. "Mr. Corley pointed out that it's not wise we have another young lady in the house. He has a point. We've discussed this. But now it's time to take action. With the wedding in just a couple of days, it's only reasonable to consent to such a recommendation. It's for the best."

She huffed. "The best for whom?"

Jensen watched as his father threw his hands in the air in frustration. "I'm your husband. I'm the man of the house. What I say goes!"

"No." Paula shook her head. "That's not how it works. You're too old to throw a tantrum, Angus. What exactly did Mr. Corley say?"

Jensen closed his mouth. It clicked loudly but his parents had already forgotten he was there. Not for a second did he consider moving. If Vance Corley wanted something to do with Samantha, then he was going to find out and make sure the man never touched her.

His hands balled into fists at the very thought. Though he had never hurt someone before, shoving Mr. Corley into a jail cell sounded mighty pleasing.

"He knows Samantha has been staying with us," Angus explained. "Everyone knows about her and her parents, apparently. Well,

everyone thought she was dead. While he was glad to hear she was doing well, and while what happened to her was tragic, he requested we find an alternative living arrangement since his daughter would be joining us.”

Glancing at his mother, Jensen watched as Paula narrowed her eyes at her husband. The older man looked rather uncomfortable with the scrutiny but didn’t back down. “Is it only because she’s pretty?”

Jensen bit the inside of his cheek so hard that he tasted blood.

“Just think about it,” Angus suggested. “What if we had a daughter going off to marry a man and there was another young lady staying in that house? Paula, please,” he paused to ask, though he didn’t look happy doing it, “can we make this work? We have to do this, or he said he’ll cancel the wedding. Do you know what that would do for us?”

Without a doubt, Jensen knew what that would do. It took all of his strength not to grin. This could solve all of their problems. It

could lead to the right solution. He looked between his parents, hopeful that they might understand what this meant for them.

His parents stared at each other, having a silent conversation. His heartbeat paused as he tried to understand what they were saying. Jensen hesitated as he took a step forward. “Mother?”

She didn’t answer him. Still studying her husband, she asked, “How important is it that we develop those connections in Chicago?”

Jensen was stunned all over again. Would his mother consent to such a ridiculous idea? He coughed in surprise. First his father claimed Samantha couldn’t stay, and now his mother was about to agree. It was impossible. It couldn’t happen.

He had waited long enough, he decided. Praying that Samantha would forgive him, Jensen jumped into the conversation. He held out both hands to his parents before his father could answer his mother.

“No,” he announced. “Any work or... or connection can’t be more important than a life.”

Paula started, her shoulders jerking as she turned to him. Then she tossed him a hesitant glance before turning to her husband with an open mouth.

“We need—a life?”

Jensen swallowed and then began spilling Samantha’s story. Ruffling his hair, he glanced around to make sure they were alone before stepping in between his parents. It clued them into step closer as well, ducking their heads together.

“Samantha,” he told them. “She ran away because she knew if she stayed, someone would finish the job. The death of her parents was not an accident. It was intentional. They killed her parents on purpose and don’t know she’s alive. At least, they didn’t.

“No one knew except us.”

His mother put a hand on his arm. “What are you saying, Jensen?”

He inhaled. “I’m saying Mr. Corley wants Samantha out of here so he can get rid of her, too.”

Angus jerked back as though he’d been struck. The man stared at him for a long moment. “No,” he said. “I don’t believe that.” Then he scoffed. “You’re hearing too many things.”

Jensen blinked in confusion. “What? Father, how can you not? I just told you, Mr. Corley killed her parents and he wants to finish her. That’s why she can’t go back, that’s why she was hiding in our barn. The only reason Mr. Corley wants me to marry his daughter is to get our money. We can’t give it to him.”

“You honestly believe that?”



Jensen turned to his mother, who stared between the two men in confusion. Then they both turned to Angus Reaves, who straightened up and cleared his throat loudly.

First, he crossed his arms. Then, he said, “Jensen, you need to stop listening to sad stories from sad young ladies. I understand she’s been through a lot of trouble, but Samantha doesn’t know what she’s talking about. The wedding is under control. You’re going to marry Caroline. Samantha has nothing, and she knows it. She is going to tell you stories, anything so that she can stay. All she is doing is... is latching onto you.”

Jensen shook his head. “No.” He glanced at his mother, who looked hesitant now, torn between the different stories. His heart clenched as he tried to block out what his father was saying. Samantha wouldn’t lie to him, he knew it. She couldn’t. “That’s not what she’s doing. I know it, she told me the truth.”

“Perhaps.” Paula raised her hands to both of them. “Perhaps we should sit down and talk

to her about this? We know the young lady. We'll explain the matter and learn the truth."

Jensen watched his father grunt. "No. No, we don't need to listen to her. I've let this run wild long enough. Samantha is leaving. If not tonight, first thing in the morning. I know you don't want to listen, but I also know you two to be reasonable. What you should be considering is how suspicious it is, how convenient it is, that Miss Loche has only just now told you this after she learned who you were marrying, Jensen."

That was supposed to be the point. But Angus didn't care and wasn't going to listen any longer. Jensen knew that much. He watched his father shake his head and turn towards the barn. The man had come straight home and had not yet tended to his horse.

The lump in Jensen's throat wouldn't go away. "Mother..." He trailed off as he turned to her, his last hope. He didn't know what to think or what to do. There had to be some way to convince his father to listen to reason. But he hadn't heard a word of what was said.

Paula didn't know what to say, either. His mother looked at him helplessly before patting her hair down. She always did that when she wasn't certain what to do. It wasn't something he saw often, which is why it stood out to him.

"I'm sure he only needs some time to think," she started.

But Jensen shook his head. "No. No, you heard him. He won't listen, he doesn't get it. He didn't hear Samantha, Mother. If he did, then he would understand. She needs us to help her. You said we should take her in at the beginning. I know you believe me."

"I do." She managed to give him a strained smile. "And we are going to work this out. Everyone is having nerves about the wedding. We all need to take a deep breath and talk about. It's just cold feet. But if this is your way of trying to get out of the wedding, Jensen, I thought we talked about a more direct and truthful route."

He took a step back in disbelief. His parents weren't listening to him. It seemed impossible. Unreasonable. Though he had told jokes when he was a child, Jensen valued honesty like his parents had taught him. They had no reason not to believe him now.

If they didn't listen, then Samantha would be tossed out into the night. His heart seized as he jerked his head around to the house. She had to know what they were planning to do her. The two of them had to do something. He had to make sure she was safe.

“Jensen?”

But he didn't answer his mother. There might not be time. He ran to the house to find Samantha.





# Chapter Thirty-Four

She had never cleaned a fireplace before. Samantha knelt down on the towel as she tried to remember how her mother used to tend to the one in their house.

Paula had showed her the basics and then tended to it herself, leaving Samantha to do the easy work. Collecting the coal, dusting, cleaning, and tidying. She rubbed the bricks as she wondered what Angus Reaves had wanted to talk about. Though she knew it wasn't her business, what if it was about her?

She paused and shook her head as she assured herself that it couldn't be the case.

After all, she had Jensen. Jensen knew the truth. He was going to help her.

The beating in her heart began to slow. The spot was washed away and the fireplace was clean. Samantha stood up and collected all of her cleaning supplies.

Then the front door slammed open.

She jumped, clutching the towel to her chest. Samantha could hear the running footsteps growing closer, trailing down the hallway until they reached her. And then a breathless Jensen arrived, leaning against the doorframe.

Her heart skipped a beat as she tightened her grip on the towel.

“Jensen?” Her brow furrowed. “Are you all right?”

A lock of golden hair fell in front of his wide eyes as he hurried to her. Her stomach tightened when he reached out, hesitated, and then dropped his hands. He let out a deep breath, a strange expression briefly crossing his face before disappearing.

Something had happened. But what?



“Jensen?” She crept a small step closer. If he reached out, then she would be in his arms. It was the only place she felt safe.

It took him several deep breaths to say anything. His mouth opened and he glanced towards the window from the direction he had come.

“I told my parents.”

The words were innocent enough that it took her a second to understand what he meant by saying that. A moment later, she gasped and took a step back. Immediately, he grabbed one of her elbows to keep her from going too far away.

She didn't even know where she would go.

Again, Samantha blinked and tried to understand why he would have done that. She didn't want Paula to know. Angus had no right. Not yet, anyways. She didn't want too many people to know. It was too dangerous for them. They could be hurt, any or all of

them. It wasn't something she could allow after everything she had been through.

"Why would you do that?" She asked him. "I don't understand. I asked you not to, Jensen. Please, you promised not to tell anyone anything. It's too dangerous, too risky. Why would you tell them? Why?"

His grip tightened on her and she gasped. Hurriedly he let go, his face softening as he winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... did I hurt you? I'm sorry, that's not... Samantha, my father is trying to make you leave. He wants you out of the house."

Samantha hesitated before shaking her head. "What? Have I done something wrong? Why would he say that? What did your mother say? I have nowhere else to go, Jensen."

A lump formed in her throat, and she looked at him for guidance. Though his face was open as he talked to her, she didn't understand what was going on.

It didn't make any sense. Paula had never given her any reason to worry about being forced to leave. She didn't know where she would go next. To Baker's Creek? It was still so far away, and she would have to return to her town first to get there. The idea of returning home to where her parents had passed sent a shiver of fear down her spine. What if Corley was waiting for her?

“Mr. Corley talked to him.”

She jerked her head back up as she felt the blood drain from her face.

As she searched his eyes, she realized what he was saying. It didn't make sense at first why his father would support a murderer. But then, of course Mr. Corley would surely state a different story. He could have said anything about her. Samantha felt her mouth drop open, but she didn't know what to say.

That terrible man could have said anything. Of course Mr. Reaves would trust

him. They knew each other already, didn't they? They wanted their children to wed.

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she wished again that she hadn't listened to Jensen. Everything was wrong. If his parents trusted the Corleys, then they would choose him over her. They would be risking their lives, but how were they to know? She tried to breathe but couldn't find air. There was nothing around her.

"Whoa." Jensen reached out when she stumbled. "Samantha!"

"He knows where I am," she mumbled, her voice quivering as she shook her head. She couldn't feel her legs anymore. She wasn't certain she could feel anything but the cloak of fear that was beginning to weigh her down. It reminded her of that terrifying night in the store and how she had run for so long. For two nights and day, looking over her shoulder so she could survive.

Was there any place she could hide?

“We can fix this.” Jensen tried to sound optimistic. “Please, Samantha. There must be something we can do. I’ll talk to my parents. You can talk to them. We’ll explain everything. They’ll have to believe us, somehow.”

“How?” Her voice came out shriller than she’d intended. She coughed and pulled herself free from his hands. “No, Jensen. I... I tried. You tried. They won’t stand to reason. I know them well enough. Perhaps Paula, but if your father... no.”

She tried to think—and think fast. If Corley wanted her out, then the Reaves would have to listen. They wanted that partnership. She would have to go. But she didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t ask them for their help. If they knew where she went, she would be putting them at risk. Corley might change his mind and attack them instead of her.

Around and around in a circle spun her thoughts. She nearly grew dizzy with the effort.

Dropping the towel, she started off towards her room. "Then I have to go," she managed. Her breath was shaky as she hurried down the hall. Unable to walk straight, she had to balance herself against the wall as she headed to her room.

Jensen followed after her. "You can't go! You said he might hurt you. I can't let that happen."

"I have to," she said over her shoulder. He followed her into her bedroom as she packed the few items she owned.

Jensen blocked the door when she turned back. "You can't," he said firmly. "I can't let you get hurt. I'm sure we can work something out."

In half a second, she realized that in leaving, she might never see him again. That made her heart ache. Samantha tightened her grasp on the bag and then slipped over to Jensen. Standing on the tips of her toes, she

kissed his cheek.

The gesture caught him by surprise, and he dropped his arms. For a second, his eyes closed. But when he reached out to her, Samantha took the opportunity to slip out. It wasn't a kind thing to do. But it was for his safety, she reminded herself. It was for him.

“Samantha!” He hurried after her.

A lump formed in her throat as she hurried to the front. He was still calling her name, a hand stretched out to her. She paused at the door and gave him a bittersweet smile. Jensen stopped hopefully.

“Thank you for everything,” she managed. “But if I stay, Vance Corley may hurt me. Or worse, he'll hurt you and your family.”

He shook his head. “I'm begging you here.” His voice was tender. “Please don't.”

“I must.” Her voice cracked and she bit her lip as she turned the door handle. “Don't

come after me, Jensen. It won't be safe. Just take care of your family."

If she said anything else, Samantha knew she would collapse in a heap. Already, she was using all her energy to keep the tears back. She could still feel him on her lips, warm and soft. All she wanted to do was bury herself in his arms.

But she couldn't.

Samantha slipped out the door and hurried down the lane. She pulled her bag close as she went. And she didn't look back.







# Chapter Thirty-Five

The front door of his home swung open, though there was no one there.

Not anymore. Jensen inhaled deeply as he reached it and looked outside to find Samantha hurrying off in the distance, already past their gate. That sunken feeling of despair in his stomach continued to grow as she ran off.

Her dark hair loosened as she went, flowing over her shoulders down her back. The dark red dress she wore, an old hemmed-up one provided by his mother, danced around her feet.

“Turn back,” he begged her softly. “At least look back.”

But she didn’t.

Breathless, he stood in the doorway as she disappeared from sight. Every part of him

wanted to follow after her. To pick her up on his horse and carry them far away. To bury her safely in his arms.

Yet he couldn't push his father's words out of his head. Angus Reaves believed a different story. A story where Samantha was not a victim, but a little bug in the way, disrupting their plans. Jensen wondered how that was even possible.

In his heart, he knew it wasn't. Samantha was an honest young woman. She hadn't tried to tell him the truth of her secrets in an attempt at causing more trouble. She had only been trying to keep them safe. The less they knew, the better off they might be. He didn't necessarily agree, for he wished there was more he could have done at an earlier stage.

They might have been able to do so much more, had she said something sooner. But would she have been believed then? Jensen hesitated.

He shook his head. He was getting too carried away in his thoughts. That was no

good way to live. Especially not now, as he tried to think about what he could do to help her. Whether his parents agreed or not, he knew that Samantha was honest. And she was in danger.

“Jensen?”

His mother called to him from the other side of the house. Slowly, he forced himself to close the door. Though he didn't like her decision, she had to have a right to do as she wished. It didn't settle well in his stomach as he realized he wouldn't know if anything happened to her.

“Jensen, where are you?”

He met his mother in the hallway, his head hanging. “Here, Mother.”

“Oh,” she murmured as she reached out to comfort him. “We'll work this out, dear. It might take a few days, but I'm sure your father will come to his senses.”

Except it was too late for that. Jensen shook her off and started to pace, running his hands through his hair as he tried to think. There had to be something he could do. Something to help Samantha. Or to convince his parents. He couldn't just sit there and marry a murderer's daughter without doing anything.

"Jensen? What is it?" his mother asked him.

She didn't know. She hadn't been in the house. Nor had she seen the young woman's face of terror upon realizing she was all alone. Though Jensen hadn't understood that look in the moment, he had seen the fear. Only she hadn't been able to trust him that she wasn't on her own. And he hated that. The pit in his stomach grew and he started to pace faster around the room.

His mother watched him, stepping out of the way when he passed her. "Dear? Jensen, please. You're making me nervous. I don't like it when you pace. If you stop, we can talk to Samantha and sort out the trouble here."

She didn't know Samantha was gone.

Jensen kept moving. His mother didn't know what she didn't know. He debated telling her what had just happened. But he didn't know how to put into words Samantha's expression of fear and reluctant resolve. The way she had moved about the kitchen, avoiding his gaze to pack and leave.

He could still feel Samantha on his cheek. She smelled of cinnamon.

Before he could tell his mother, he had to consider what would happen if he confided in her. Would Samantha still be safe? Would his family be safe? What would happen if Mr. Corley knew she had just left? Jensen wondered how much his father had talked to the man, how much each of them truthfully knew.

"Jensen." His mother's sharp voice made him stop. "We need to talk. Where is Samantha?"

“I...” He couldn’t find his voice.

His mother took a step forward and paused. “She’s not here, is she?”

Jensen shook his head.

“You didn’t stop her?”

Giving his mother a look, he shook his head. “I wasn’t going to do it by force. Not to Samantha. Mother, I couldn’t not tell her what Father said. She had a right to know.”

The woman’s eyes widened. Her hands started to shake, though she held them tight to try and make them stop. But it didn’t help. She looked faint as she forced herself to take a seat.

He took a step over to her to make sure she didn’t fall over. But they were both struggling. Tension spread across his shoulders and seeped into the floor. He could feel it



everywhere, clawing at them. “I couldn’t stop her,” he mumbled.

It wasn’t enough for Paula. The woman rubbed her eyes. “We have to find her. We’ll bring her back and protect her.”

“Not if Father has his way,” Jensen countered.

She sighed. “Then we’ll take her and hide her away. Off of the farm, so she can’t be found. So she’ll be safe.”

“That’s what she just did,” he pointed out.

“But we don’t know where she is or what she’s doing,” Paula moaned. “We can’t lose her. I can’t lose another one.”

A lump formed in his throat as he thought about what she was saying. His parents hadn’t talked to him and Mitchell about what had happened. But he still remembered. Though hardly five years old, he had wondered what it meant when his mother announced she was

with child. They were so hopeful. She had grown fat and happy, making him curious.

Until one day, everything went wrong.

He hadn't seen his mother come out of her room for days, but he could hear her crying. Their neighbors had stopped by several times to see her and help out. Everyone used large, confusing words that Jensen had never heard before. It took him years to understand that his little sister had been stillborn.

Jensen licked his lips as he forced himself to sit. If he kept pacing, he felt he would go mad. "What can we do?" he forced himself to say in a measured tone. "Samantha left because Father was going to force her out. She wouldn't tell me where she was going because she didn't want to put us in danger. But we aren't. We're safe. And she's out there somewhere on her own."

His mother inhaled shakily as she rubbed her face one more time. It took her a few seconds to pull herself together. Then she looked her son in the eye. "If what you said

about Samantha is true, then Mr. Corley can't find her. Perhaps she knows of somewhere she can go where she will be safe."

"But we won't know," he added what she had yet to say. "I can't just sit here not knowing, Mother."

She swallowed hard as she slowly grew more composed. "Maybe it's best that we don't know. We... we are going to take a deep breath, Jensen, and then resume our chores. Samantha is gone and perhaps it's for the best."

He stared at her in dismay. "How can you say that?"

"Think," she ordered him. "The less we know, the better. Until there is proof of any crime, then there is only supposition. That's not enough for the law, and you know that's not enough for your Father. We will bide our time and... and find a solution."

Jensen tried not to think about how soon

the wedding was supposed to be. Caroline Corley was the furthest thing from his mind. If he had any luck, they would never make it to the church, but he didn't know what to do. Even if he chased after Samantha, there were only so many solutions.

Instead, he dropped to his knees and began to pray. He prayed for her safety and he prayed for guidance. Then, he felt a hand on his shoulder as his mother joined him. Perhaps, together with the Lord, they could learn what could be done.





# Chapter Thirty-Six

Now that Samantha knew which direction she was headed, she felt slightly more comforted than the last time she had taken to the road.

And yet, the tremors of fear still rippled through her body as she clutched her bag and watched carefully for anyone else who might come upon the road. She walked quickly, on the edge of the road. There were enough dips and turns that she would catch anyone else who might be coming along nearby.

Though the fear was the same, everything else felt different about this journey. She was headed back towards her home in Reidsfield to continue on to Baker's Creek. There had to be a place for her to hide and wait out the trouble. Or, if she was lucky, they would have a sheriff she could speak to about Vance Corley.

It was him. After seeing his wife and daughter, after hearing his voice from across

the house, memories pieced it all together for her.

She remembered that day when he had thrown her that nasty look after talking to her parents. She remembered listening to her parents argue about what they should do if Mr. Corley refused to pay back the loan. Her mother had wanted to wait, because the man had said he was facing trouble from people in Chicago and he merely needed time. But her father had said it was only an excuse to never pay out.

And Samantha remembered talking to her parents as the flames rose around them, as they'd told her it could only have been him. She had heard his voice after falling out of the window.

Mr. Corley was the only one with any reason to come after her parents, though she still didn't think it was good enough of a reason to commit such a horrible crime on her family. There had been a few other loans exchanged with others in town, but they had all been paid back. At least, Samantha was



mostly certain of that.

No one had ever looked at her so murderously as that moment when Mr. Corley had glared at her.

Samantha shuddered and tried to focus.

“First things first,” she mumbled to herself. She swallowed hard as her throat grew parched. But she refused to drink any water, in fear of running out too soon. Her eyes focused on the rolling green landscape all around.

A tree branch shuddered, and she jumped. When two birds flew out, she closed her eyes. She had to be careful. But if she grew too nervous, she could put herself in more danger. Shaking her head for being so silly, Samantha licked her lips and hurried on.

The sun set, but she forced herself to keep moving. After finding a dip in a nearby hill nearly hidden by brush, she finally curled up in the shadows for some rest. But she couldn't

sleep. Her body was awake again as she started to pay closer attention to the sounds in the night. Owls hooted to each other and snatched up their midnight snacks. Trees and bushes shook in the evening wind. Nothing felt still.

Samantha eventually gave up and continued on. The waning moon cast just enough light for her to keep to the path. The first time she had gone this way, she had stayed closer to the bushes to avoid being seen. But now, she had to cross more distance. Vance Corley knew where she had just been. If she didn't get far enough away, then he would find her much too easily.

But he wasn't going to. He couldn't. A small stroke of determination kept her from hunching over in uncertainty. She clung tightly to her bag and pressed on.

It was a few hours after sunrise when she noticed dust rising in the air from behind her. Samantha felt her heart thud against her ribs in an attempt to break free. Something was headed her way. Her lips clamped shut as she

scurried off the road, ducking behind bushes and under trees until she felt positive that she could not be seen from the road.

Then, she waited.

Her feet sunk into the soft dirt, pushing pebbles into her shoes. A branch dug into her shoulder and she knew a few twigs and leaves had found their way into her hair. Samantha tied her bag around her so she wouldn't have to worry about it if she had to get up and run. Breathlessly, she listened as a horse and wagon slowly crept her way.

A fortunate bend in the road made it easier for her to see what was coming.

The horse appeared first, tugging a small wagon with two wheels. One person drove. A woman, from the look of the blue bonnet on the head. Samantha straightened as she wondered if it might be Paula. The horse didn't look familiar, but she didn't know all the creatures from the ranch that well.

But she stayed put, hidden away in the shadows, waiting. It wasn't until the horse was beside her on the road that she gasped, realizing she knew who drove the cart.

It wasn't Paula Reaves, it was Mary Thompson from Reidsfield.

Samantha jumped up before she knew what she was doing. "Mrs. Thompson!" Compelled to talk to the woman, she hurried out of the brush, pushing the branches aside to reach the road. Mary Thompson and her husband owned the blacksmith's forge just down the street from her parents' shop. The couple had never had children, but they had been close to her parents. The Thompsons would always gift her with sweets for the holidays, as though they were family. "Mrs. Thompson!"

The horse jerked to a stop with a huff as the woman on the wagon looked around wildly. Her curly red hair poked out from the bonnet, as unruly as ever. She looked like she'd been in the sun recently, but otherwise seemed healthy.

Samantha reached the road, panting, and managed a wave to Mrs. Thompson. The woman's wide mouth opened before she tossed the reins aside and stumbled down onto the ground. "Can I believe my eyes? Oh, my Lord and Savior, you saved her. Is it you, Samantha Loche?"

They clung tightly to each other. The hug reminded Samantha of her mother. She squeezed her eyes tight to keep the tears at bay as she breathed shakily. "It's me, Mrs. Thompson. I'm really here."

"What are you doing out here on the road?" The woman demanded. "Let me have a look at you. Why, your parents... we thought... but you're here..." Mrs. Thompson pulled back to run her hands over Samantha. First it was her cheeks, then her hair, then her shoulders and hands. "You are here, aren't you? Where you have been, Samantha? What happened?"

Relief washed down her shoulders to find such a kind, familiar face from her past. But it

was daylight, and Samantha knew she couldn't stay there forever. Her mind worked quickly as she glanced around. "It's hard to explain. Can you give me a ride into town? I can talk on the way. Do you have another bonnet?"

"Get in this moment." Mrs. Thompson nodded. "Not a bonnet, but I have a shawl. Your poor face. You'll get all red in the sun. Up you go, dear. My, my. And my Gerald thought it would be an uneventful trip. That's why I came alone. Had to deliver some horseshoes down this way. Why, I never thought... here we are."

Within minutes, the two women were sitting in the wagon and back on the road. Samantha looked around fearfully as she pulled the shawl closer over her face to hide her features. Certainly, if Vance Corley came down the road, he wouldn't expect her to be there with anyone else.

Fortunately, her fears never came to fruition. The two of them met no one else on the long road back to town. Samantha talked most of the way, explaining what had

happened and where she had been. She had worried that her mistake with the Reaves had been to hide the truth for too long. For this reason, she told Mrs. Thompson everything.

The woman wanted to drive her on to Baker's Creek, but an idea had begun to grow in Samantha's mind. She was tired of running and hiding. She had done enough of that so far. It was time to take action.

But to do that, she needed more evidence that everyone would believe. The best way to obtain it was to search for any clues inside her own home. And she would need help to take the man down. It was a risky idea, but Samantha wondered if Mrs. Corley would help. If the woman knew what he had done, surely she would send him off to jail. She had a daughter herself, so she had to understand.

That was how Samantha wound up back in her home shortly after the sun had set. Mrs. Thompson had grudgingly dropped her off. It had taken some convincing, but the woman had left her and gone to deliver a message.

Darkness set in around her. She didn't light any candles as she paced around the home she knew so well. Though there was comfort to being there again, it felt much too empty without her parents.

But she was done running. There was Baker's Creek and there were towns beyond it where she could go to. But then she would spend her whole life running.

Samantha wondered if Vance Corley had expected her to come back. If he demanded she leave the Reaves, where did he think she would go? She swallowed hard, rubbing her clammy hands on her skirts. The smart idea would have been to keep moving on.

"No more running," she demanded of herself.

She needed Irene Corley there. The woman would know where her husband was the night of the fire. Or, at least, she would know that he wasn't home. She might even know who would have helped him light the fire.



Every instinct in her body told her that the Corleys all knew the truth. Both Irene and her daughter. Part of them, even if they didn't know it, knew who Vance Corley really was. But the trick was knowing if they would have the courage to stand up against such an evil and dangerous man.

“I have to try,” she ordered herself.

Morning was breaking when there were footsteps on the front porch. Samantha jumped up from her chair and was already moving to the door when she heard a soft knock. She unlocked it and peeked out.

Irene Corley stood there stiffly, dressed in a thick coat. Her eyes flickered lightly upon seeing Samantha there, but it was hard to see what that meant.

She came, Samantha told herself. That had to mean something. She opened the door and let the woman in. “Thank you for coming. I'll keep this quick. Your husband is a dangerous

man.” And just like she had explained to Mrs. Thompson, Samantha told Irene how Vance Corley had set the fire that had killed her parents.

Though she wasn’t certain what to expect from the woman after her explanation, Samantha nearly stopped breathing when Irene Corley merely blinked at her. There was no surprise in her features, nothing that said she didn’t already know.

“And?” Irene Corley cleared her throat.

Samantha’s mouth turned dry. “Please,” she murmured. “I don’t care what else has happened. But I need your help. I’ll get a sheriff to arrest him. But he could go free if we’re not careful. I need you to testify against your husband.”

She was going to say more, but the other woman’s face contorted in a sharp flinch of fear. Irene Corley took a step back and shook her head. A shaky breath escaped her. “I can’t,” the woman choked.

“It’s the only way,” Samantha pleaded. “Please.”

But Irene Corley was still shaking her head. “No. No, I can’t. No, here’s what you do. You leave town and you run. You run, and you never stop. I know my husband. If he knew you were here, if he knows where you are, he’ll come for you.”

The woman turned towards the door to leave. Samantha was too stunned to move. She wondered how Irene could accept this. She considered how afraid the woman truly was of her husband.

“I’m sorry,” Irene managed to say as she opened the door. But she couldn’t look at Samantha. “I’m so sorry. But I can’t do it. Not to Vance. I’m sorry, dear. Run.” And then she disappeared.

Shocked, Samantha stumbled a few steps back, where she landed in her chair again. It was a hard chair, a large one that her father

had specially made to his specifications. He had been a particular man. She didn't sit comfortably in it, but she couldn't move. The silence helped her hostage.

A lump formed in Samantha's throat as she tried to think about what to do. That had been her biggest hope, the highest hurdle she had to overcome. But the woman wouldn't do it. Samantha recognized the fear in Irene Corley's face, for she had felt it herself.

She stood up shakily and went to her parents' room. The house had been left untouched all this time, though it was a little dusty. That didn't stop her from collapsing in a heap onto the large bed. It still smelled like her parents. She closed her eyes as she prayed for hope.

But then, the darkness swept in over her.





# Chapter Thirty- Seven

The sun arose once more, as though it were teasing him.

Jensen didn't appreciate it. He rolled over on his bed and closed his eyes. Though he was usually awake by this point in the day, he didn't see any point in it today. The wedding was tomorrow, and he didn't know where Samantha was.

It had been two days since she'd left.

He had forced himself to get up the day before, after the first night without her in the house. But he couldn't sleep, because he was so used to having quiet conversations with her before retiring for the evening. He'd tossed and turned, wondering where she was hiding. If she was still hiding. After reluctantly rising, Jensen had attempted to resume his responsibilities but had no heart in it.

Devastation clung to him as he tried to function and live his normal life. But nothing made sense anymore without Samantha there. He could hardly eat or sleep for the fear of losing her forever.

That kiss made sense to him now. Jensen swore he could still feel her warm, tender lips on his cheek. It had been her farewell to him. That thought made him sick to his stomach.

He wasn't ready to say goodbye to her. Not for forever.

His father wouldn't talk to him. And he wouldn't talk to his father. Not since Samantha had run out their front door. Though Jensen was glad he didn't have to talk to the man, he knew it did them little good.

Perhaps by not rising for the day, he mused, his father would have to come talk to him. Then he would have to listen to the facts that Jensen knew to be true, and they would find Samantha and bring her back to safety.



Though the idea was weak, there was the slightest glimmer of hope in his heart. That kept him from going back to sleep. Not that he was certain he could. It had taken him much too long to do so once again.

Rubbing his face, Jensen sighed.

There was a knock at the door. “Are you ever coming out?” Mitchell called to him.

“No,” Jensen replied. He wasn’t certain if it was a lie or the truth.

He could almost hear his brother shrug through the door. “All right. Talk to you later.” And his footsteps faded away.

Now that he was awake, Jensen’s mind raced again. It was like he was at full gallop and couldn’t stop. First, there was Caroline and the wedding, then her father, then Samantha, then fire and flames. And then his own father. The conflicting feelings and the uncertainty cycled through his mind, and it

took all his strength to keep breathing normally.

After spending a few minutes with his eyes closed, concentrating on his breath, Jensen realized he could hear voices around the house. Pausing, he sat up with a frown. Sound carried well enough in the house. But these voices were practically yelling.

Both of his parents were inside, talking more loudly than he had ever heard them. Jumping to his feet, he pulled on his clothes and hurried down the hall. Paula and Angus Reaves hardly ever raised their voices. They could always make their point without such unnecessary behavior.

It was a little different that morning.

“You didn’t even give Samantha an opportunity to defend herself,” his mother was saying sternly from the kitchen when Jensen pulled up.

Across the hall, his father paced near the

fireplace. “Well, she’s gone now. So that’s not our problem.”

“She would still be here if you hadn’t decided to listen to Vance Corley instead of us. Instead of your own family! What has gotten into you, Angus?”

“You wouldn’t even listen to me! I never got to explain. All of you took it out of my control before we could talk about it.”

Jensen felt his heart thump as he wondered how this had begun. And why it hadn’t continued two days ago, when there was still so much more they could have done to resolve this strained situation. The pit in his stomach had never faded, settling in him with a sense of unease. But now it rose up, thriving. He swallowed hard as his parents kept arguing.

Paula scoffed as the tension mounted. “You didn’t want to talk about it, remember? I’m tired of this. I’m tired of you and Jensen not talking. I’m tired of being alone in this house, worrying about Samantha. And I’m

tired of wondering if our son is going to marry the daughter of a murderer! Don't you care?"

"Of course I do."

She threw up her arms in frustration. "Even if this didn't work out, we can't move forward with the wedding. How can we do that to our son? Jensen doesn't love Caroline. And I don't want to lose him. Do you?"

"What? No, I don't."

Though his father opened his mouth to say something more, Jensen hurried forward between them. His parents stood in opposite rooms and he glanced at each of them breathlessly. He put up his hands in surrender, shaking his head at them.

His mother sighed. "Jensen..."

"I believe Samantha." He swallowed as he gave her a nod and turned to his father—the person he had to convince most of all. His mother likely already knew everything he was

about to say. "She had nothing to gain from telling me the truth. All she wanted was support. If anything, she was trying to protect us."

Angus cleared his throat as he rubbed the back of his neck. "But she could be wrong."

"Perhaps," Jensen allowed, though he hated to say it. "And perhaps not. How comfortable are you risking Samantha's life? My life? Or my mother's? Father, you know how much I care for this family and this ranch. I would have gone through with the marriage if that was what was best."

"But it can't be. Not after everything I know. Not after Samantha. She's innocent, and she needs our help. And when I find her, she's the one I'm going to marry." Jensen took a deep breath as his father startled. "I love her."

Jensen only wished that he had been able to tell Samantha his feelings first. His stomach tightened with regret that he hadn't. Would it have changed anything? He wondered if that would have changed her mind.

Or if she really meant that she would never be with him.

But he shook his head. Even if she didn't want to be, even if she later refused him, he was still going to go find her.

The realization hit him suddenly, nearly knocking him off his feet.

That's what he had to do. Knowing that the woman he loved was out there alone, or worse, was too much. He had to go find her and make sure she was safe. Samantha's fear about Vance Corley and his murder of her parents only strengthened his resolve. She was out there, and she needed his help. If anything happened to her, he knew he would never forgive himself.

"When did this happen?" his father voiced in the silence.

Jensen swallowed hard.

Then he shrugged as his mind turned back to all the moments he'd shared with Samantha. There was the night he had found her hiding out in the hay in their old barn, along with the following morning when he brought her inside to meet his mother. Every morning when they met and the evenings where they would sneak outside for a late stroll. There were the seconds they had in passing that sent fire in his veins and there were the hours that brought more peace to his soul than he'd ever experienced.

"I don't know," he offered simply. "But I'm going to find her, no matter what it takes."

Just as he turned to leave, there was a knock at the door.

His mother was so caught up in the moment that he saw her flinch from the corner of his eye. He glanced over at his father, who was frowning—which meant neither of them had been expecting any company.

"Samantha," he wondered aloud.

Unable to help himself, Jensen sprinted over to the front door. His parents trailed behind breathlessly as he pulled it open.

Irene Corley stood in the doorway with frazzled hair and wide eyes. She was rumped with wrinkled clothes and shaking hands. Her chin wobbled, and he wondered how she suddenly looked twenty years older. It had taken him a moment to recognize her—she was almost a completely different person.

She brought a shaking hand to her mouth as she looked around at them. Jensen glanced at his mother who took a step forward.

“Good day, Mrs. Corley,” Paula offered carefully. “This is rather unexpected. Is... is something the matter?”

The question unlocked a sudden sob from the woman. She nearly collapsed in the doorway and Jensen watched his mother catch the struggling woman. Mrs. Corley grabbed onto Paula’s shoulder and the wall as she



frantically looked around.

“He’s not here. He didn’t follow me,” she stammered. “You have to... you have to fix this.”

Jensen felt the fear from the other day creep back into his spine. His hands balled into fists as he tried to ignore it. “Fix what? What happened? Do you know where Samantha is?”

With a hand over her mouth, Mrs. Corley nodded through a hiccup. “I knew. I always knew, but I didn’t want to. I was so scared. You don’t understand, you couldn’t... I knew it was him from the beginning. We didn’t have the money and... and I should have gone to the sheriff.”

“About what?” Jensen asked her sharply as he tried to understand what she was saying. “The fire? Did you know about the fire?”

She nodded. “We didn’t have the money! I didn’t think he would... I only thought... but

when Mr. Loche said he would expose us... I was so scared. How could I risk my life? My baby's?"

"But Samantha," Paula whispered with a slow shake of her head. "You were fine to sentence her and her family to death?"

The woman let out another sob. "He said he would kill us, too! I didn't want to keep quiet, but I didn't know what else to do. He said it would only happen once. And... and once we had money again, your money, then we would be fine. That's why I agreed to this... this monstrosity of a wedding. It was going to be fine."

Jensen's jaw clenched, and his father started behind him. But they stayed where they stood as the woman blubbered a few more unintelligible words. Jensen glanced at his mother, but she was concentrating on keeping Mrs. Corley on her feet.

It was a confession. He realized immediately how valuable that was, wishing they were near a sheriff now to hear it. But at

least they knew. His father had to believe all of this now.

“Then we’re going to the sheriff,” Jensen heard his father grunt. “Jensen, I want you to ride out. But bring Mitchell back, in case Vance comes here.”

Mrs. Corley hiccupped three times in a row. “He won’t,” she confessed. “He’s far away now.” Then she moaned as she shook her head. “I thought it was over. But then we saw her here. I didn’t think she had survived. I thought... I thought I saw a ghost. That had to be God’s grace. I know it. Then it was confirmed at supper. He wanted to come here himself first and... but I tried. I tried to stop him. I didn’t even tell him about Samantha’s note.”

Jensen jerked his head up. “What note?”

The woman shakily pulled out a crumpled piece of paper as she gasped for breath. “She wanted me to testify against my husband. I didn’t want to. I told her I wouldn’t. I knew what happened, but I didn’t want to risk my

life. Or Caroline's. I didn't. But this is too much. I didn't know what to do. The sheriff was too far. I thought maybe... please, you have to do something."

"Do what? What are you not telling us?" Jensen asked her. "Where is your husband?"

The woman wailed, throwing her hands up into the air. "That's what I'm trying to tell you! He found her. Vance went too far. He's going to hurt her. Samantha. I was so afraid, but then I heard him talking to... to Richie. He's the one who helped my husband. They... they found Samantha, and they're going to kill her!"

Mrs. Corley nearly toppled over as Jensen watched his mother grow weak. He jumped forward, grabbing his mother's arm and Mrs. Corley's shoulder before his father jumped in. The two of them helped the women to the nearby parlor.

But the moment they were seated, Jensen turned to Mrs. Corley with their noses only inches apart. "Where?" he demanded. "Where

are they?"

"I wrote it on the back of the note," the woman choked out faintly before she began to heavily fan herself. Sweat trickled down her brow, but he hardly noticed as he read the note.

On one side, it read, 'Irene Corley, please come to the Loche residence immediately. Alone.' And then, on the other, it showed a bare map of a cabin just a mile south of Reidsfield.

"Please," Mrs. Corley whimpered. "I didn't mean to. I didn't want any of this. I just wanted a good life for my child. This isn't what we wanted."

Jensen stood up to straighten his shirt. "I'm going now."

His father followed suit. "Paula?" She nodded, collecting herself. "Stay here. We'll send the neighbors this way to keep an eye on the house. Then we're taking Mitchell and

going to rescue Samantha.”

Adrenaline coursed through Jensen’s body so powerfully that he felt he could run faster than a horse. He gave his father a nod, glad that they’d finally agreed on something again, and hurried out the door. It took all his strength to be patient with his father and brother before heading down the road. The last two days had put him too far behind to dawdle any longer, with the life of the woman he loved on the line.

“Please be safe,” he prayed to the Lord for Samantha. They were going as fast as they could to her. He had to reach her. He had to save her.







# Chapter Thirty-

## Eight

Darkness was everywhere.

Inside her lungs, making it difficult to breathe. All around her, until she felt claustrophobic. And tight around her arms and legs so she couldn't move.

Samantha wasn't even certain she could blink. All she could hear was her shaky breathing. Though she could feel herself slowly waking up, a thick fear clung to her so tightly that it took her several minutes of wrestling around to realize why she felt that way.

The darkness wasn't natural. She wasn't in her bed back home, nor the bed she used at the Reaves' ranch house. A hiccup escaped her and Samantha froze in the silence. She thought she heard something else, but couldn't be sure.

“Hello?”

She moved again but found she couldn't go anywhere. Her limbs were tied. The more she woke up, the more she understood her predicament. Sweat trickled down her back and she shuddered. This didn't make sense. Someone had tied her up. But why? And where was she?

A scream threatened to escape her lips. But there was something over her mouth, as well. She almost gagged, shaking her head. But it didn't help. After reining in the terror, Samantha tried to remember what had happened last.

There was the afternoon she had left the Reaves' ranch. She remembered that. It hurt her heart to recall Jensen's pained face as she'd walked out the door. As she reminded herself that it had been for his own good, she thought forward and recalled meeting Mrs. Thompson on the road.

But that woman would never hurt her. They had parted ways after reaching town. Samantha recalled the emotional moment she had returned to her home. It wasn't as awful as when she'd gone just after escaping the fire in the general store that claimed her parents' lives. But it wasn't joyful, by any means.

She had paced for hours, fiddling with everything in the kitchen before Mrs. Corley had arrived.

Samantha froze as she recalled their short conversation. She had begged for the woman's help. But Irene Corley had refused, shakily running out the door. The woman was clearly afraid of her own husband. Samantha wondered if Irene Corley had told Vance about her being back in town.

Stiffening, she remembered collapsing in a heap on a bed. She couldn't sleep, but she'd tried, tossing and turning. Then there was a dream. A nightmare, with a terrifying vision of two masked men coming for her. The floorboards had hardly creaked. Before she had been able to sit up and scream, the

moonlit room had descended into pitch black.

It hadn't been a dream.

Horror gripped Samantha tight as she let out a strangled scream. The reality of her situation dawned on her. Her heart pounded. Though dizzy and confused, she wrestled with her bindings and tried to do something, do anything. She didn't want to think about what might happen if she didn't.

As much as she tossed and turned, Samantha was still lying down and couldn't seem to go anywhere. Her calves were tied close together so she could hardly kick. Something bound around her elbows and her wrists was connected to wood. She vaguely registered the feel of thick, scratchy rope.

She groaned. This was all her fault. She hadn't done enough. There had been more than enough time to go to the authorities to arrest Vance Corley. If she had done that first, then he would have at least been caught. She could have used the time while he was shut up in jail to look for the evidence she needed.

That time could have even been used to look for witnesses like Mrs. Corley and beg them to come forward.

All of this was because she had waited too long. Regret sunk into her chest with a groan.

Her head was throbbing. There was a blindfold across her eyes, for that was the only explanation. Unless she was truly blind. But when she turned her head up, Samantha thought she could see something light. And whatever was over her mouth covered her chin and she couldn't wiggle it off. It smelled old and musty—so bad that, in a moment of panic, she started to gag.

Just as she began to try and rein in the terror so she wouldn't throw up against it, something grabbed her shoulder. She flinched and tried to scream again. It sounded more like a gurgle. There was the hot sting of tears as they rubbed painfully against her eyes.

“Hush,” a voice called softly to her. “Just a second.”

It was a woman's voice.

Samantha froze. Gasping for air, she flinched as chilled hands first tugged down the gag from her mouth, so it laid against her neck like a scarf. Then there were hands in her hair, freeing her from the blindfold.

She wasn't blind. But there was no reassurance as she found herself staring at the blurry sight of Caroline Corley. It took her a moment to place the young woman's face. Especially since her heart was beating out of control and the other woman looked as terrified as Samantha felt.

That girl was the last person Samantha would have expected to see. Just as she opened her mouth to beg the girl to free her, Caroline put a finger to her lips.

Though she bit her lip, Samantha couldn't yet control her breathing. There was too much panic-driven adrenaline coursing through her body. Her foot twitched as she glanced around

to see if they were alone. It was a small room, and she wasn't certain what was outside it. She gulped loudly in the silence as Caroline's eyes widened.

“Shh,” the other girl instructed sternly. Then she swallowed loudly herself as she brushed her hair out of her face. It didn't look like it had seen a comb in days. “Please. Don't be scared. I won't hurt you. Don't... It's Samantha, yes?”

Nodding slowly, Samantha tried to think fast. Why was Caroline there? Where were her parents? She wondered if the girl knew what her father was up to. For a second, she was afraid that the young woman had helped cause all the trouble. She swallowed, looking around again.

It was an awkward position, lying on one side on the floor. Caroline knelt before her, with a bed behind her. Her hands were tied to the leg of the bed frame. A sour taste entered her mouth. It was probably only dust, but that didn't reassure her.

“If you don’t want to hurt me...” Samantha turned shakily back to the other young woman. She had noticed the door was closed ahead of them. What awaited them out there? “What are you doing here?”

The young woman turned away, towards her legs. Her hands clumsily tugged at the ropes. “My mother sent me. She told me everything. My father... I know he’s not the best sort of man, but I never imagined... My mother made me promise to apologize. She said it wasn’t meant to come to this.

“Mrs. Thompson came to our house the other night. I don’t know her well. I don’t know anyone out here in this terrible desert. But she was always nice, and I took the note for Mother. I wanted to come along, but... but she made me stay. To keep an eye on my father.”

Samantha tried to sit up but clumsily fell back and hit her head. It only made the headache that she had been ignoring that much worse. Groaning, she tried to swallow, but her throat was parched. There was no



more moisture. “Your mother told him, didn’t she?”

“No!” Caroline turned to her with wild eyes. Even through the light streaming in from the dirty window, Samantha could see how scared the young woman was. Her whole body shook as though she were riding a horse. “No, she didn’t.

“She wouldn’t have. I know it. No, it was Richie, my father’s man from Chicago. We didn’t even know he had come out here with us. Or followed us, I don’t know. But my mother heard them talking after she came back and realized what had happened.”

The story slowly came together in Samantha’s mind. She blinked slowly. “What happened to your mother? He didn’t hurt her, did he?”

“No.” Then Caroline inhaled sharply before she added with a breaking voice, “But he might. After... after my father and Richie found you, they left you here and came back to the house. That’s when my mother

overheard the conversation. She told me everything and... and then said she was going to the ranch to get help. But she lied to my father, saying she was going to town. If he caught her, if he knows... Oh, I don't know what he'll do."

Samantha attempted to offer comforting words to the young woman, but then she closed her mouth and closed her eyes as she rested awkwardly on the ground still tied with ropes. There were no words of comfort she could offer in that moment.

If Vance Corley was willing to murder her parents and then steal her away to finish the job, what else was he willing to do?

Her eyes darted towards the other door as she tried to think. She hadn't heard anyone else nearby since waking and being helped by Caroline. That could possibly mean that they were alone. If she could get free, then they could run away. But where would they go? She didn't know the second man, Richie. He could look like anyone and be capable of anything.

Then Samantha looked around, arching her neck to get a better look towards the dirty window across the room. “Where are we?” She asked in a whisper. “Are we still in Reidsfield?”

To her dismay, Caroline shook her head. The young woman was silently tearing up, though trying to hide the tears. “No. We’re a mile outside of town.”

Samantha’s heart sunk. She didn’t know the area well at all. Even if she might be free, she wouldn’t know where to go. There could be nothing out there, with nowhere to hide. Or perhaps more wild beasts that might kill her before Vance Corley could reach her.

Weighing their options, Samantha licked her cracked lips. The stench of the old, musty cabin filled her lungs as she sought to catch her breath. Between the two of them, there had to be something they could do. She couldn’t just wait there to die. Caroline hadn’t risked her own life to let that happen.

No, she told herself, both of them were going to make it out alive.

“Wait.” Her brow furrowed as she thought about what the other young woman had said. “You said your mother was... she was going to a ranch? What ranch?”

Caroline tucked her hair over her shoulder. “To the Reaves’, of course. She didn’t know who else to turn to. We don’t know anyone else out here.”

Samantha’s heart leapt in her chest as she realized what that meant. Jensen. He would come for her. She tried to keep the hope from growing, but the glimmer wouldn’t fade. Jensen would come for her. Samantha just knew it.

“Here is what we’re going to do,” Samantha managed to say without her voice coming across as too shaky. “You’re going to untie me. And then we’re going to leave.”

She wasn’t ready to die. Not when her

parents still hadn't seen justice for their early deaths. Samantha pushed her fear down and shook off the panic. That would have to wait. She gave Caroline a nod, and the girl clumsily returned to fiddling with the knots.

Samantha only prayed that they would be fast enough.





# Chapter Thirty-Nine

“Be safe!” Paula shouted as they passed the house.

She grabbed her chest with her hands, watching them. Jensen could feel her gaze on him. Unable to help himself, he glanced down at his saddlebags where his rifle rested.

It was a wild land they lived in, so one always took a weapon wherever they traveled. Even on the way into town, it was important to have an axe or a gun. They all knew that. He even kept a pistol strapped to his waist while he was out in the fields. It was taken off when he came in the house and put back on whenever he left. The same went for his brother and father.

But this time was different.

He could feel it in his bones. There was no telling what would happen next. And he didn't think that in the way of possibly coming



across a bear or a wild dog. It was in the way of possibly having to point it at another man. Or worse.

Jensen gripped the reins tightly, pushing his feet against the stirrups. Dog leaned into the gallop. That did the trick. His horse took the lead between his father and brother. It didn't make much of a difference, but it was enough.

It had to be enough. He had to reach her in time.

Part of him hoped that this was all an honest mistake and they would find her safe and well. He wanted that more than anything.

The hope had to stem from his safe childhood. There had been few risks, and comforting arms to run into if anything unpleasant happened. Every scolding was delivered lovingly, with the promise to help him be better. Life had always been cheerful and reassuring for him.

Now, he wanted such a life for Samantha. She had already been through too much. The young woman deserved safety, security, and joy. Not this mess she was trapped in.

She was trapped. The piece of paper that Mrs. Corley had given him was burning a hole in his pocket. A cabin, she had said to them, a small drafty cabin hidden off behind dead trees that could be seen above a cornfield.

Above them, the sky shone blue without a cloud to be seen. Jensen gritted his teeth as he turned his gaze back to the road before them. That mattered more than a sky that betrayed them. There was no reason for the day to be so bright and cheerful when it was filled with such danger.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled.

He could hear the wild beating in his heart as it matched the thudding gallop of his horse's hooves beneath him. Again and again, they pounded into the dirt, moving across long stretches of land with each step. His horse was one of the fastest, bred from a wild stallion.

Though often only used to help around the ranch, Jensen made sure to take care of the animal and let him run wild often.

It benefited them now.

“Sun is setting,” Mitchell pointed out the obvious a short while later. “What do we want to do?”

Before Jensen could speak up, his father answered the question. “We keep riding!”

The hope within his chest grew a little more. His father really was on his side now. The older man looked over as though he knew what was on his son’s mind and gave him a nod. They turned back to the road and continued forward.

Just as the horses began to slow down wearily, they came across a cornfield. He felt his gut churn, telling him they were in the right place. He swallowed and started to slow Dog down. His father and brother followed. Soon, they were moving at an easy trot as they

reached the field.

“Well?” Mitchell asked, patting his horse’s neck. All three animals were panting, not having had this much exercise in a while.

Their father straightened his shoulders before moving ahead of them. “I’m going to talk to Vance. It needs to be done,” he added when Jensen opened his mouth. “If that young lady is hurt, it’s my fault. We’re going to take care of this peaceably. But keep those rifles on your laps to be careful.

“For all we know, they can see us right now. It’s unfamiliar territory, so we’re moving in blind. We’re going to do this carefully and we’re going to do this smart. Understand?” He narrowed his eyes as he watched both of his sons nod.

Jensen’s grip tightened on his reins before he slowly pulled his rifle free. First, he double checked that it was loaded, then he pulled out more ammo to keep handy. When his hand started to shake, he tightened it into a fist until it stopped. A slow breath was let out and

he turned back to the others.

Angus gave them a nod and then motioned for them to start moving. He took the lead as they rounded the field. The corn was as high as his shoulders, growing yellow and green. But his eyes were focused ahead to the tall, gray trees without any leaves.

There was something in the air. He could taste it. Jensen licked his lips as he looked around warily. Mrs. Corley said there were going to be two of them. They didn't see any reason why there would be more. Most folks in the area were good people, after all. No one would be comfortable supporting such a villainous act. Only two of them against the three Reaves men.

Though he wanted to believe it was as simple as that, Jensen knew he had to be more careful. He didn't know Vance Corley well, and he didn't know who this second man was.

He wiped his sweaty palm on his pants before nudging his horse forward. He prayed that none of them made a mistake. He prayed

that Samantha was safe, and they could resolve this without bloodshed.

Just as he was going to tell his father that he should take the lead, they reached a clearing.

All three of them hesitated. But the house was just ahead now, with the field behind them. The trees were everywhere, but the path to the small, crumbling cabin was clear. All the grass there was dead, leading the way to the thin porch where half the roof was missing.

Jensen spotted the two men just as they looked up at their guests.

It looked like they had been deep in conversation a second ago. But their heads jerked up as they stared across the path. The horses walked forward at what looked like a leisurely pace. But Jensen saw his father's shoulders stiffen. A second later, the man stopped his horse and climbed down.

Mitchell and Jensen looked warily at each other. He didn't like the idea of being caught without a horse. It gave them a helpful advantage. Especially for Mitchell, who still knew very little of what was going on. When they ran to retrieve him, Jensen had only made time to explain that Vance Corley had kidnapped Samantha with another man.

A rescue sounded sweet, but there were roadblocks in the way.

Jensen thought again of Samantha as he glanced at the cabin. She had to be in there. He didn't know how he knew it, but the knowledge buzzed through his entire body like truth. She was so close. Without another thought, he slid off his horse.

He patted Dog's nose as he took a step forward, and his horse stayed put from the signal. Mitchell followed. The two of them trailed behind their father, their rifles in their hands. Jensen wasn't certain he wanted to raise and point his weapon anywhere just yet, so he kept it aimed towards the ground with both hands. But he was ready if necessary.

“Well, well,” Vance called out cheerfully. “If it isn’t the Reaves clan. Pleasant day we have here. To what do we owe the honor?”

He strolled ahead of his man, Richie, wearing a wide grin. He did his best to look innocent. But Jensen noticed the man’s flighty hands as they tugged at his suspenders, his pockets, his neck. They were subtle moves, but they were noticed.

“Where is Samantha Loche?” Angus demanded.

Vance glanced back at the other man, who was nearly as hairy as a bear. He was large, too, with deeply-set eyes that glared at the newcomers. Vance turned to face them with a tight smile. “I wouldn’t know, Angus. I know I asked you to remove the girl from your ranch, but I didn’t say you needed to do anything with her. It isn’t exactly proper when your son is about to marry my daughter, is it?”

“The marriage is off,” Jensen cut in.



His father raised a hand but didn't look at him. "He's right," he followed up. "There won't be a wedding tomorrow. We've heard enough about your crimes and we're going to bring you in."

"Crimes?" Vance chuckled. "What crimes?" He ran a hand across his brow as though he were sweating. The round man took a few steps forward, shrugging. "You don't know anything."

"We know enough," Angus said sternly. "If you come quietly, we'll make sure you're treated fair."

But the man shrugged again. "I'm sorry, but I don't quite understand what you're talking about. Why, just the other day, we were having a peaceable conversation. And now, there are guns in my face. What is this all about? I told you, having unwed women in the house can be a dangerous thing. You had best not believe everything you hear."

“Oh, I’m learning,” Angus assured him. “I might not have believed one young woman. But I am willing to believe the wife of a criminal when she tells me what is going on.”

Vance stopped short, his eyes widening. His face paled as his lips moved noiselessly for a moment. “Irene? She went to your house?” He paused and then forced a chuckle. “Of course. My family isn’t used to living in the middle of nowhere, you see.” The man rambled on as Angus reached him in the middle of the path. “It’s easy to get confused, of course. Confused, and to imagine silly things.”

As he tried to talk his way out of this, Jensen searched for a chance to examine the cabin. There was one window near the door, but he couldn’t see through it. Wood blocked part of it, and there was too much grime to see through.

Then, there was the other man. Richie. He was close behind Vance, though at another angle so he was more in the line of Mitchell’s sight than anyone else’s. Jensen glanced at his

brother and was relieved to see that the younger man was watching Richie carefully, his gun partially raised and resting comfortably in his arms. That stranger was the wild card, and Jensen didn't know what to expect.

A trickle of sweat slipped down his spine. He forced himself not to flinch.

As the two older men talked, Jensen tried not to allow himself to grow distracted. All Vance Corley was trying to do was confuse them with webs of tangled stories and excuses that were made of nothing but air. Just as he wondered if anyone else was growing tired of the irritating lies, his father cut through the noise.

"I'm not going to ask again," Angus demanded. "No more lies, Vance. Bring out the young woman. I know she's here."

"Who?" the other man spat. Jensen's jaw clenched. "That wench? She's a little nobody, Angus. Just a pebble in our shoes. We get rid of her now and we can have everything we

talked about. You trust me on this, don't you?"

Such cruel and insulting words brought a fire into Jensen's soul. To hear someone talk about Samantha Loche in that manner was not permissible. Before he could raise his gun, however, his father took action.

Angus took a step forward and swung his fist. "Not this time," he announced.

The punch to Vance Corley's jaw knocked him to the ground. Jensen and Mitchell had their guns raised before they heard the thud. Everything happened in a mere second or less. Though there was a strand of hair in his eyes, Jensen didn't budge.

His eyes fell on Richie's hands, which danced at his sides, clearly itching to draw his pistol.

Mitchell chuckled. "You really think you'll get a bullet out before we land two in you? I wouldn't take those odds if I were you, old man."

Richie snarled but took a step back and rose his hands in defeat.

“Get them,” Vance demanded when he looked around. The man lay on the ground, with blood trickling out of his nose. He waved a hand as he struggled to get to his feet. “Richie, what am I paying you for? We’re not over this easily. Why, I’ll end this once and for all!”

Jensen watched as his father accepted the fight with Vance and the two older men started to punch their way through a conversation. They moved, and Jensen was forced to drop his gun, no longer able to point it without endangering his father or brother. Across from them, he watched Mitchell drop his own gun, tossing it aside to chase after Richie, who had turned tail towards the trees to make his escape. Jensen stayed put, hands on his gun in case the opportunity presented itself to protect his father and brother from the dangerous men.

But the two fights only lasted mere

seconds before both Vance and Richie were collapsed in the dirt, panting and bleeding with no more fight in them.

His heart thudded. Jensen felt his mouth go dry as he realized it was over.

No, not yet. Not quite.

Not until Samantha was beside him.

Just as that thought came to mind, Jensen raised his gaze back to the cabin they had forgotten about since they'd started talking to Corley. Feeling his blood pulse, he swallowed hard and took a step forward.

Then the door opened, and out came Samantha, running towards him.

# Epilogue

“Jensen!” Samantha couldn’t stop herself from crying out his name while she ran towards him.

The sight of him standing there spread hope across her entire body. It vibrated within her as she escaped the confines of the house. She had started out with Caroline. But the moment she saw Jensen, she couldn’t hold herself back.

They had heard the voices nearby. A shiver of fear had climbed down her spine. When the two men had reached the porch, Caroline had frozen stiff on her knees, her eyes wide. It left Samantha to scramble with the ropes to finish freeing herself. Halfway done with the arms, she had wiggled around and tugged with her knees until the rope gave.

“They’re going to find us,” Caroline had whispered in horror, her breath hitching.

Rope burns ignored, Samantha gulped in air as she looked around. "We can't stay here," she pointed out breathlessly. "We have to do something."

But she didn't know what they could do. The two young women grasped each other anxiously, clumsily climbing up to their feet. Caroline was stiff with fear, and Samantha felt weak from being tied for however long it had been. Her head swam as she straightened. Clinging to Caroline, she waited for the dizziness to pass and then took a small step forward.

She swayed, but she could still move. She didn't fall, which she counted as a blessing. Tugging Caroline with her, she hurried quietly over to the window to see if anything could be seen. All that was out there were dead trees.

Half the window was boarded up. Samantha prodded at the wood, but nothing gave way. Her heart hammered anxiously in her chest as she tried not to think about how badly her hands were shaking. There wasn't any way for either of them to escape.



“We have to get out,” Caroline whimpered. “I don’t want him to find me.”

Samantha didn’t blame her. She felt the same terror clinging to her—if they were found out, Caroline would most likely be punished and returned home. But her? She’d been brought out here to die. Vance Corley would want to make sure the job happened one way or another.

If they didn’t escape now, she might never get another chance.

“The door.” Samantha forced the two of them towards it. Their steps were reluctant, but eventually, they made it. She put a hand on the doorknob and swallowed. All it took was one solid turn. Except she wasn’t certain what she might find on the other side. Though she told herself to be strong, it took her several moments to gather her courage.

She sniffed and jerked it a crack open.

Another room. Samantha stopped breathing as her eyes darted around the dark corners to see who else might be with them. She glanced around twice more, just to be certain. They were alone. No one else was in the cabin. It was only comprised of two rooms, and there was no one else inside.

But the voices were louder as she stepped through.

Caroline clung close to her as they inched their way along. First, they skirted the room and went to the next window to see if they might know who was speaking. As they grew closer, the voices became less muddled.

He was there. Vance Corley was there. The two young women realized it at the same time and froze. A bead of sweat dripped down Samantha's face. Terror had swallowed her whole, just like the night she lost her parents. Hearing that wicked man's voice on the other side of a wall again only made it worse. All she wanted to do was curl up into a ball and pray her way to freedom.

Knowing that wouldn't work, Samantha kept hearing her mother's voice in her head, pushing her forward. Her mother was telling her to keep going, to not give up. She couldn't stop now. If she did, she would never have another chance.

When minutes ticked by and nothing happened, Samantha forced them to move again. She wiped her brow as she tried to peek through the window, but there was too much dirt and too many cobwebs for her to see anything but a few shadowy figures.

"What is going on out there?" Caroline begged.

Samantha could only shake her head. "Let's go to the door," she whispered. When the young woman stiffened once more, she elbowed Caroline and pushed her forward. It wasn't a nice thing to do, but they couldn't just stand there and wait for their fate. She had realized she had done that for much too long.

As they reached the door, she heard a

shout from the other side.

She hesitated. But then came the voice of her parents. It was as if they were right beside her. "Run!" they told her.

Samantha obeyed. She yanked the door open and hurried out, yanking Caroline with her. They clung to one another clumsily, anxious and afraid, as they stepped out onto the porch. She tried to see her surroundings but was immediately blinded by a pillar of light streaming through the broken roof. She raised a hand as she tugged Caroline forward.

Just as they made it off the porch, she heard grunting. The woman beside her froze suddenly and Samantha was forced to stop. Ahead of them were two large men wrestling on the ground. She saw smears of blood across both of them.

Then, she looked up and saw Jensen.

He stood tall and proud, with his shoulders back. He held a rifle in his arms as

he watched the fight, ready to intercede. For some reason, she wasn't surprised. Something about the moment felt right. Of course, he was there, only yards away from her. He was supposed to be there. Jensen had come for her.

Samantha heard her parents again as she forgot her fear.

So, she called his name, freeing herself from Caroline, and ran straight into his arms.

Jensen was ready for her, scooping her up in his grasp to shield her from the world. She ran into him so quickly that she lost her breath. But it didn't matter. Her heart thudded in her chest and she could hear his beating equally hard. As he tightened his grasp around her, Samantha knew she was safe.

"Samantha." He murmured her name breathlessly several times before loosening his grasp with one arm to lean back and study her. Their chests bumped into each other as they tried to catch their breath. His brow was furrowed seriously as he rubbed her cheek to

make sure she was well. “You’re safe? You’re not hurt?”

Blinking back tears, she nodded. “I prayed you would find me.”

He nodded before shaking his head. “I should have never let you go. If anything had happened, if Vance Corley had... I would have never forgiven myself.” His bold blue eyes searched her face, moving around quickly before meeting her gaze to stop there.

She could hardly breathe. Overwhelmed with everything that had happened, Samantha tried to think. But she couldn’t.

Especially when Jensen tugged on her chin. Samantha had just enough time to lick her dry, chapped lips before he leaned in and kissed her deeply. She had never been kissed before, but somehow, she knew this was exactly what a kiss was meant to feel like. Standing on the tips of her toes, she clung to him and responded eagerly.

It was a chaste kiss, but a passionate one. One that lasted both too long and not long enough. Her heart skipped a beat. Samantha wasn't sure if it was from being tied up for a long time on the floor or from the kiss, but her head was swimming by the time Jensen pulled away.

After all, they had an audience.

Breathlessly, she took a step back as her cheeks flamed with embarrassment. But after nearly being lost from one another forever, Jensen didn't let go of her.

Their moment was over, for there were matters to attend to with everyone else nearby. Her nerves slowly faded as Jensen took charge of what might happen next. The two of them brought Caroline forward as Mr. Reaves and Mitchell tied up Vance Corley and Richie. They found the two men's horses and loaded them up.

Mitchell brought Caroline up behind him on his horse, while Samantha joined Jensen on Dog. Jensen put her across his legs, sidesaddle,

with his arms around her to guide the reins. It wasn't the most comfortable seat, but Samantha only cared that she was no longer tied up in the dark.

Especially when Jensen pulled her in close so they could start riding. Her heart was still pounding as they left the horrid cabin and headed toward Reidsfield. Caroline directed them to the judge's office, and Angus went to find the nearest sheriff. Samantha pointed out her family's place, where Jensen took her until they could sort everything out.

He didn't leave her side, however, for the rest of the day. He hardly left her during the entire next week that led up to the trial for her parents' murders.

The trial was a fairly quick one. Though Samantha had been fearful that her claims would not be enough, both Irena and Caroline spoke against Vance as well. The man was stunned to see his family's betrayal, but he had no defense that was strong enough to keep him and his man, Richie, from being found guilty and sentenced to life in prison. The two



of them were being sent very, very far away for the rest of Samantha's life.

It took time for her to comprehend what that really meant. That she was really safe. Jensen stayed beside her. Only at night were they separated. None of his family complained when Samantha joined Jensen out in the field, or when Jensen stayed around the house to help in the kitchen.

Samantha could hardly put her gratitude and adoration into words for him. His wedding was clearly cancelled, as Caroline and her mother left town and returned to Chicago.

The Reaves family helped send them on their way, and they helped her clean up her parents' lodge. Everything was coming to a close. She looked around her empty home and tried to imagine sleeping there again, but it wasn't the home she had known before. There was a quiet to it that didn't feel right to her anymore. She rubbed her arms for warmth as she turned towards the front door.

Jensen was waiting for her.

“You could stay here,” Jensen offered when her eyes wandered one more time.

She took a shaky breath as she turned to him. He took her hands in his. Samantha studied his eyes thoughtfully, wondering what he was thinking. What he saw in her. “I don’t know,” she murmured. “That life I had was gone. Without my parents... I’m still not certain who I am or... or what I want.”

He took a step closer as he squeezed her hands. “Aren’t you?”

“Jensen...”

A light sparkled in his eyes. “I know who I am and who I can be. Especially with you. I know I want you. Don’t you feel that between us? I can’t offer much, except for safety and... and my heart. But marry me, Samantha, and I’ll do everything I can to keep you both safe and happy for the rest of our lives.”

Her mouth opened and closed as she stared at him.

Those soft, sweet eyes. His kind brow. That sweet smile. In a heartbeat, she knew she couldn't deny him.

After all, that was everything her soul wanted.

"We can wait," he offered quickly when she hadn't yet answered. Jensen licked his lips and stepped even closer until there wasn't any space between them. "After everything that's happened, I understand. I can wait as long as I need to. Until you're ready. Years, if I have to. As long as we can—"

There were no words for the elation that spread all the way to her fingertips. Pure joy tickled her very soul so strongly that she could hardly contain it. A life with Jensen was all she wanted. A thrill ran through her body as she stood on the tips of her toes to throw her arms around him.

Burying one hand in his thick blonde hair, she pulled him close. “Of course,” she murmured in his ear. “Yes. A lifetime together and more.”

And Samantha sealed her promise to Jensen with a kiss.

*THE END?*

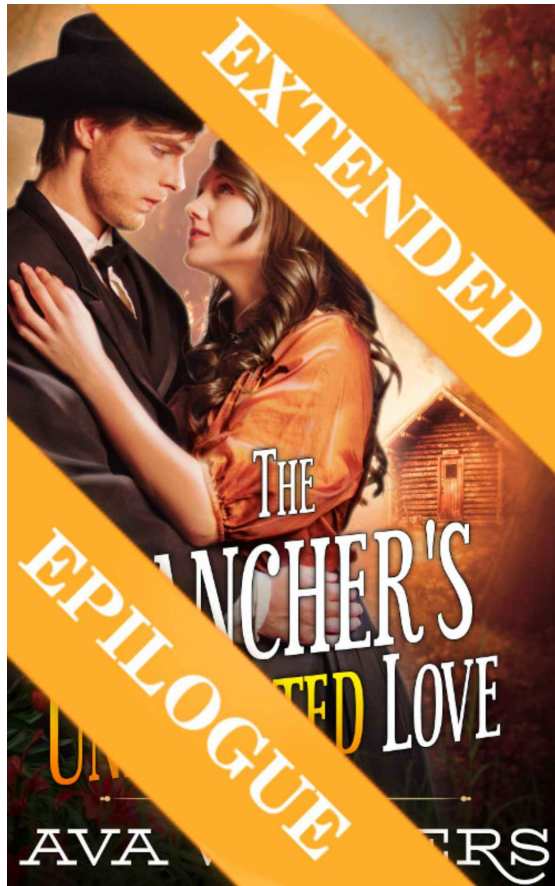
(turn the page)

# Extended Epilogue

---

**Can't get enough of Samantha and  
Jensen's story?**

Don't miss the complementary chapters  
featuring the beloved couple!



**CLICK/TAP here to get the Extended  
Epilogue (FREE)**

I guarantee you that you won't be  
disappointed

Then return, for an extra sweet treat from  
me...

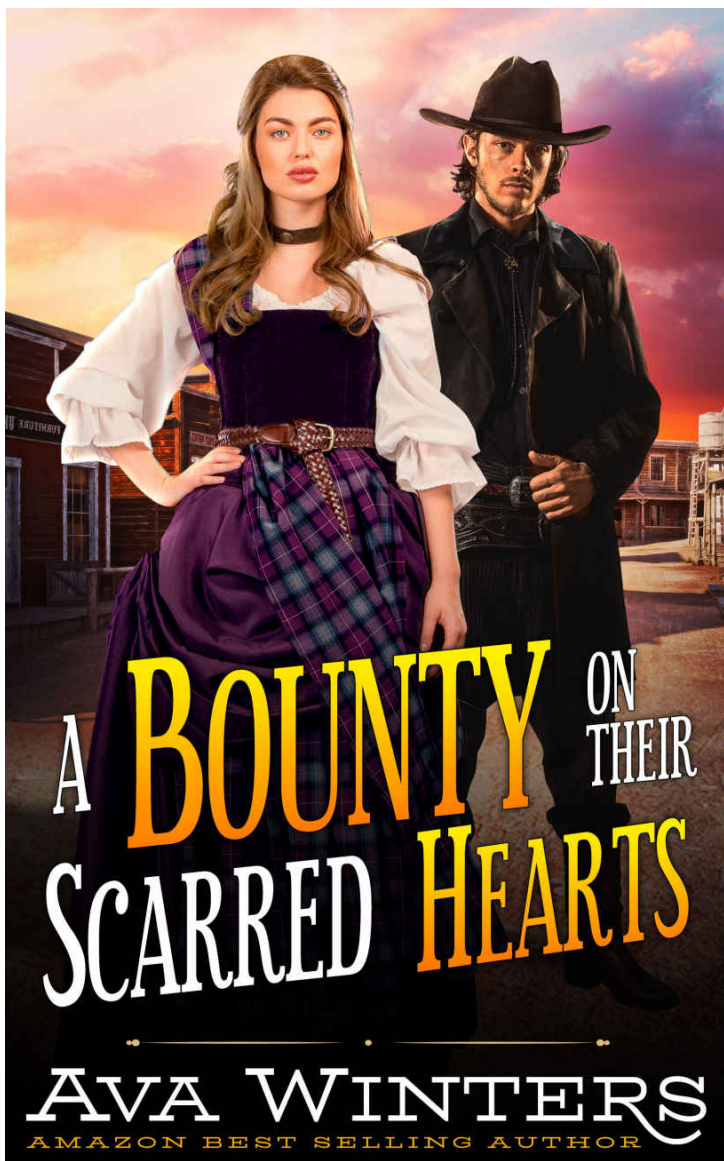
*(turn the page)*

# Ready for your next Romance story?

---

**Turn on the next page to read the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
Book of this Western Historical Romance  
Boxset “A Bounty on Their Scarred Hearts”!  
Don’t miss my Amazon Best Selling Novel!**

*(turn the page)*







# A Bounty on Their Scarred Hearts



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

*A Western Historical Romance  
Book*

by

*Ava Winters*

# Blurb

---

**Can Millie's quiet strength break down this bounty hunter's wall?**

Millie is a caring and fierce young woman. Losing her mother a year ago, she is left responsible for caring for her father who isn't handling his loss very well.

Luke Houston is an intelligent and decisive bounty hunter. Losing his parents at a young age, he mistakenly blames himself for not protecting them.

Luke comes into town as Millie's father gets accused of a murder he did not commit. His moral compass tells him that things are not as they appear.

While both of them fight the demons in their past, their affection will get stronger by the day and even though they started at the wrong foot, they will develop deep feelings for each other.

Thinking they have discovered the truth, they are unaware that they have been played!

Will they be able to save the town or will they die trying?

# Prologue

The sun was finally westering and the dust settling as Sheriff Harvey Roach urged his horse toward The Saloon. Haven Ridge, Colorado had exactly one watering hole and that was The Saloon, aptly named by the townspeople even before there was much of a town there.

After dismounting and tethering his horse, Leon, to the post, Sheriff Roach surveyed the main road through the small but growing town. Most of the men had either headed home for the day or had landed inside The Saloon for poker, women, drinks, or all three. Most evenings were quiet until the sun went down—that's when the trouble usually started. With the road mostly empty and the smell of evening meals cooking, Harvey suspected the evening would be a quiet one.

Pushing his hat back, Sheriff Roach stepped through the batwing doors. The interior was dim after being out in the sun all

day and Harvey gave his eyes a moment to adjust while he stood by the doors. His ears didn't need to adjust, though. He could hear a familiar voice from the far end of the bar.

Clyde McCormick, the bartender, poured a drink and tilted it toward Harvey. "Need to wet your whistle, Sheriff?" His look told Harvey he was probably going to need it before the evening was done.

Nodding to the patrons playing poker to his left, Harvey made his way to the bar and took the drink. "Just sarsaparilla, Clyde. Don't need any alcohol in me from the looks of it." He nodded toward Isaac Thomas at the far end of the bar.

Clyde nodded and scoffed. "Been in here for a few hours now. He's been drinking the whole time. Bemoaning the loss of his wife, but she's been dead a year now, ain't it time he moved on from that? He's starting to affect my business, Sheriff."

Harvey watched Isaac and drank from his sarsaparilla, enjoying the tangy sweetness. Isaac stumbled backward, tripping over his own foot, and hitting the floor hard. The fall winded him, but he was back on his feet a second later, railing at the men who were laughing at him.

“He’s making a darn fool of himself.” Clyde shook his head in disgust and turned away from Harvey to replace a glass on the shelf.

One of the laughing men reached out to pat Isaac on the shoulder, a quieting, soothing gesture that said ‘hey, we’re only joshing you, Isaac’ and Isaac slapped his hand away.

“Don’t be condescending to me, you little half-wit. Ain’t you ever heard of respecting your elders?” Isaac’s voice boomed through The Saloon. His gray hair had tufted out on the sides and stood out comically.

Harvey watched the situation disintegrate

and found nothing comical about Isaac's appearance. Clyde was right. He was making a fool of himself. Too drunk to stand straight. This was possibly the worst Isaac had ever looked. He pitched and yawed as he tried to sustain his balance.

"Aw, come on, Isaac, he didn't mean no harm," offered another of the men.

"It's *Mr. Thomas* to y'all. That's respect! None of you have shown me any respect since my wife died." Isaac's voice lost its authority as the man began to sob.

One look at that wreck of a man and Harvey knew there would be no reasoning with him in that state. The only person who could still get through to him, at least some of the time, was his daughter Millie. *She used to be the apple of his eye*, Harvey thought, shaking his head. He wondered if Isaac thought about those times any more or if he had given up on what he had loved most in life besides his wife.



Tapping the glass, Harvey tossed Clyde a coin. "Thanks." Sighing, he put his hat back on his aching head. Taking one last look over his shoulder as he headed for the door, he saw Isaac, sobbing and reaching for yet another drink from the bar.

Samuel Preston stepped inside and nodded acknowledgment at the sheriff. Harvey returned the nod and sidestepped Samuel, continuing out of The Saloon. Clyde nodded and put the coin in his pocket, thinking that the good sheriff should have done something about Isaac. The man was only getting drunker by the minute.

As he rode toward the Thomas homestead, he considered the many times he had given Isaac leeway because of his loss. Wilma had been a lovely, sweet, and generous woman in life and Isaac had been the salt of the earth. Harvey was sure that losing such a woman after twenty years of marriage had been hard on Isaac. A more difficult thing than he thought he could ever survive.

But Isaac had to get ahold of himself and stop causing trouble. Before Harvey had been appointed as the first lawman of Haven Ridge two years ago, vigilante justice had ruled the town. There were plenty of people who would love to revert to that system of meting out justice however they saw fit. If he didn't do something about Isaac soon, he feared for the man's safety.

Arriving at the edge of the Thomas property, Harvey was amazed at how well Millie seemed to be keeping the place by herself. Goodness knew her father was little help. He slowed Leon to a trot and then to a walk as he scanned the property for Millie. Not seeing her outside, he stationed Leon at the tethering post near the invitingly tall grass and headed up the slope to the porch.

Supper was on and it smelled of savory beef and onions. Harvey's gut rumbled, reminding him that he had not taken supper yet and that he had missed lunch, too. Millie took so much after her mother. Her voice, high and pure, floated to him as he raised his hand to knock on the door. She was singing a

church hymn. *No time to listen to her singing no matter how pretty it sounds*, he thought. He rapped sharply on the door.

“Miss Thomas? It’s Sheriff Roach. I need to speak to you, please.” He stepped back and removed his hat in anticipation of her appearance.

The singing ceased. “I’ll be right there,” she called from the kitchen. A pot clanked noisily and then another as she removed them from the stove, no doubt. Seconds later, she appeared in the doorway with only the hazy gray of the screen door separating them. “Yes, Sheriff? Is it my father again?”

Looking down at the porch boards, he nodded. “I’m afraid so, Miss Thomas. I hate to bother you at suppertime, but I need you to come to The Saloon with me and calm him down before he gets into trouble again.”

Her expression went from cherubic to weathered in an instant. Her shoulders,

usually straight as was her posture, drooped. It was like looking at a much older version of Millie. A much older and more exhausted Millie bedraggled by her father's actions.

As Harvey and Millie rode into town, the sound of an angry mob broke through the night.

“Wait here, Miss Thomas. I have to see what's going on and I don't want you in danger. I'll be right back.” Harvey pointed toward his little jail station.

The shouts and whoops became suddenly louder. Alarmed, Harvey jolted Leon forward into a run. The shouts from the crowd grew louder until he dismounted amidst the cacophony to assess the situation.

Two of Deacon's men had Isaac pinned down in the dirt.

“Git off me, you filthy rats!” His words

were badly slurred and the command came out nearly garbled beyond recognition.

Sadly, Harvey had dealt with a drunken Isaac several times and understood his mashed-together words perfectly. The more Isaac struggled, the rougher Deacon's men handled him.

“Hey! Whoa!” Harvey rushed toward the three men holding up his hands in a stop gesture.

The crowd quieted to only indistinct murmurs. Others were heading toward the scene from both directions. *Another exciting night in Haven Ridge*, Harvey thought.

The man with his knee in Isaac's back, Harvey thought his name was Wade, nodded toward the saloon's entrance. “We got trouble, Sheriff. You'll want to go on in there and take a good look before you go yelling at us to let him up from here.”

Upon stepping inside, Harvey's blood chilled at the sight of Samuel Preston lying sprawled on his back, unmoving, with a bullet wound in his chest. Carson Morgan, Deacon's right-hand man, was standing over Samuel's body, looking both flustered and shocked.

"Carson, what happened here?" Harvey scrutinized the scene and didn't like it from the beginning. Something was off and badly so, but he couldn't put his finger on exactly what that something was.

"Ole Isaac got drunker than a skunk after you left to go fetch Miss Millie. He was giving the boys what-for about their lack of respect." He pointed to the same spot where Harvey had seen him becoming belligerent before he had left.

Continuing, Carson slid his hat back from his brow. "Samuel stepped in and tried to talk him down a little and they got into one heck of an argument. Then they got quiet and I thought it was over. But Isaac wasn't done drinking." He shook his head slowly. "After a

few more shots of whiskey, he picked a fight with Samuel. They were really clobbering each other, but Samuel was getting the best of Isaac.” He threw mock-punches and even kicked out with his boot as he enacted the scene from memory. “I reckon Isaac didn’t take to being beaten in a fight he started, so he grabbed Samuel’s gun from its holster and shot him dead right here. With his own gun, he got killed. That ain’t right, Sheriff. I don’t care who you are, that just ain’t right.” Shaking his head vehemently, he hitched his trousers up, thumbed his nose, and glared at Harvey.

Harvey sidestepped the spreading pool of blood and moved toward Carson, watching him closely for signs that he was lying. There were plenty of signs, but it was hard to pin them down; they were oily and kept slipping away before they could be examined properly. The way his eyes darted up and away from Harvey as he talked, the way he shifted restlessly from one foot to the other, his over-the-top reenactment of the brawl, and last but not least, the way Clyde shied away from the scene almost as if he were hiding behind his bar, hoping not to be called out.

“Where’s Samuel’s gun now?” He noted that the bar was empty except for Samuel’s corpse, Carson, Clyde, and Jacob Conley. *If memory serves, Jacob was Samuel’s best friend*, Harvey thought, eyeing the scared looking man cowering at a table near the corner.

Carson turned and pointed to the bar. “Why, it’s right there. My boys wrestled with Isaac and took it from him. I told ’em to hold him down out there ’til you got back.”

Harvey moved to the bar, pulling the murder weapon to him. Clyde wouldn’t make eye contact. He had found something interesting on the floor between his feet from the looks of him.

“Clyde, is that how it happened? Is that what *you* saw?” Harvey popped the cylinder out of Samuel’s gun. One bullet missing. He pushed it back into place.

“That’s about right, Sheriff. Just like



Carson said. You saw how drunk Isaac already was when you left out.” Clyde resumed his inspection of that interesting thing between his feet.

Harvey leaned up and looked over to see what was holding Clyde’s attention. The floor was bare wood and there wasn’t a single thing on it except Clyde’s boots. He gave Clyde a hard look, took Samuel’s gun, and made his way over to Jacob. He pulled out a chair and sat directly across from the man. “Jacob, you were Sam’s best friend, right?” He was almost a hundred percent sure he was correct in that assumption.

Jacob pulled his hat off and put it on his knee, running his hand over his shaggy mop of hair, huffing out a tight breath that seemed to have been pent-up for a while. He nodded.

“Yeah. We been friends since I can remember.” He suddenly sniffled loudly and wiped at his eyes almost angrily, keeping them downcast. “He was a good man. He didn’t deserve this.” His eyes flitted to the macabre

scene in the center of the building and then up to meet Harvey's steady gaze. Immediately, Jacob shifted, averted his gaze, and crammed his hat back on his head.

“Was anyone else in here when it happened?”

Jacob bounced his leg up and down rapidly as he tried to make eye contact with Sheriff Roach, but he couldn't quite manage it. Shaking his head, he mumbled, “No, just us three and them two fighting.” His eyes flitted around, following his finger as he quickly pointed to each man.

Outside, the scene was heating up again. More people had gathered and the crowd had moved in tighter to get a good look at Deacon's men and Isaac. Of course, the one Harvey thought was named Wade had divulged to the onlookers that Isaac had shot poor Samuel Preston dead in cold blood with the man's own gun.

Stepping out, Harvey was greeted with angry demands that Isaac should be strung up right then and there. Samuel was a good man and didn't have an enemy among the people. Or so they made it seem that way at that moment.

Crowds are fickle though and when they're out for blood, they come together under the guise of unity. Holding his hands high in a quieting gesture again, Harvey stepped to the scene where Isaac had run out of steam. From the bruises and lacerations on his face, he'd had the steam beaten out of him.

"There won't be a hanging without a fair trial!" Harvey yelled to be heard over the rumble of the crowd.

Deacon's men roused the crowd as Harvey walked over to cuff Isaac.

Wade threw his arms up in the air. "There should be swift justice here! Samuel deserves it, don't you all agree?"

The crowd whooped and hollered their unanimous agreement. The sheriff elbowed past Deacon's other men and put the cuffs on Isaac. Wade once again incited the crowd to roars and demands of a hanging.

Harvey turned to the man, anger flaring. "Wade, isn't it?"

The man sneered at the sheriff. "Yeah."

"Wade, if you rile this crowd one more time, I'm going to run you in and put you in the cell, too. There won't be a hanging under my watch. This man is going to stand trial for what he supposedly did and I'll keep him safe until then." He turned to the crowd and yelled, "Do you hear me? No hanging without a fair trial. That's how the law works, that's why you appointed me sheriff, and that's exactly how I intend to handle this. Now go on back home. All of you."

A few stragglers from the crowd traipsed

along behind Sheriff Roach as he took Isaac down the road toward the jail. There were a couple of shouts for justice, but they had mostly settled once Isaac had been removed from the scene. Looking over his shoulder, Harvey saw that Wade and the other man stood in the middle of the road, arms crossed over chests, watching him. He didn't care for their twin expressions that said they were up to no good.



# Chapter One

Though she appreciated Sheriff Roach's kindness toward her and her father, Millie had come to dread his visits. They were happening more often with every passing week and each time she would ride to town and find her father drunker than on the previous occasion. Usually, he was causing some sort of fuss with others in the saloon. She would calm him down and bring him home, let him sleep it off, and the next day, he would always promise to do better.

And he was better afterward for a day or two.

In the beginning, he would get into trouble, make his customary promise to do better, and Millie would know he wouldn't cause any trouble again for at least ten or twelve days. He was getting worse, though. It happened gradually. The twelve-day period turned into a ten-day period, the ten-day period turned to eight, and so on.

He had caused her much embarrassment and grief over the last several months. She had overlooked his actions for a while, knowing he missed her mother, but even she was running out of patience, it seemed. Since her mother's death, her father had declined in health, attitude, fortitude, and morals.

She was at her wits' end when the sheriff knocked on her door this time.

At twenty-two, Millie knew she should have been married and starting a family of her own, but so far, she had not had the opportunity. Sheriff Roach was a kind man, and Millie was indebted to him for his kindness. And as far as men went, he was the only one who came knocking at her door these days. It was never to ask to see her for any romantic reason. It was always to ask her to bail her father out of some trouble he'd gotten himself into.

Her troublesome father.



Sheriff Roach had every right to arrest her father and toss him into jail but had only done it twice so far—and those two times were only because it was so late that the sheriff couldn't bring himself to fetch her out in the middle of the night. Not taking time to change out of her chore dress, in fact, not even taking off her apron, Millie wiped her hands and tossed the towel onto the skinny table by the door where her mother had always kept a bouquet of fresh flowers. The vase sat empty now and she sighed for the lack of that bit of gentleness, thoughtfulness, and beauty.

Their little house was nothing fancy, but her mother had always seen to it that the place was warm, clean, inviting, and cozy for her family. Her handmade quilts and throw blankets adorned the plain furniture. And the large rug she had traded two of her quilts for still brightened the family room—the much disused family room. Since her death, the room had only served as a place for Millie to do a little needlework or to nurse her father in front of the fire on cold evenings when she had brought him back from town and his

drinking.

As she mounted her own horse, Brandywine, Millie's heart dropped. It was becoming more difficult every day to find reasons to smile, especially when her father was drinking so much that he barely knew his own name. She tried to do her duty and help him. She nursed him when he fell ill or injured himself while drunk, she kept the homestead up mostly by herself, had breakfast set before he rose in the mornings, and supper awaited him every night. As his daughter, it was her duty to do these things. Mostly, she did them out of love. She hoped that one day soon, he would see the error of his ways and straighten up.

There was a strip of daylight left in the sky as they rode toward town proper and Millie watched as the mountain peak ate the sun a little at a time sending out rays of deep crimson and purple to paint the sky. It was beautiful. Beautiful sunsets were common in Haven Ridge and she loved them all. Each one was unique, painting intrinsic patterns through the clouds and over the land.

*And I've seen too many of them from the back of a horse as I ride toward town to collect Papa before he gets into serious trouble, she thought miserably.*

At the midpoint between the Thomas property and Haven Ridge, the land stretched out in all directions seemingly endless. The town could not be seen ahead and homesteads were not visible. The tall grass and wildflowers on either side of the path swayed in the gentle constant breeze, the peaceful undulations of untouched, unblemished beauty entreating passersby to stop and enjoy it for a while.

But Millie didn't have time. She never had time just to stop and take in the splendor of the midpoint in the trek from home to town. The place never failed to lighten her burdens, even if only fleetingly, as she passed through. The fields of flowers stretched out, usually meeting the bottoms of the tall, craggy mountains, but with the sun bedding down behind the mountain, the light was lost and the flowered fields ended in shadows long

before reaching the steep mountains.

She rode in silence the rest of the way to the town limits.

Harvey slowed his horse and spoke to Millie. "Miss Thomas, please talk to him tomorrow, get him to see that he needs to stop all this. There are people who want to go back to the way things were done before I was sheriff. And Deacon is chief among them. He's my boss and I shouldn't be talking ill of him, but he's a bad egg."

Millie nodded, the stone of sorrow weighing her heart down further. "I will, Sheriff. I always talk to him." She sighed and pressed the fingers of her right hand to the center of her forehead, trying to stave off the tears that she felt were close.

Setting her mind in a different direction to avoid a show of emotion, she thought about how things had been before the sheriff took his post. Of course, Deacon Owens would be

the main instigator in a movement that took the people of Haven Ridge back to vigilante justice. As the founder and mayor of Haven Ridge, he had argued against Harvey Roach becoming sheriff, stating that his Vigilance Committee was the only true way to keep justice. Millie was certain the snake didn't want a true lawman running around town. That would mean Deacon himself might fall under the sheriff's scrutiny eventually. She had heard enough of her father's conversations with men from other homesteads to know that Deacon didn't do things legally all the time. He was greedy for money and power and some of the homesteaders were afraid of him and his men.

Deacon didn't want to be just the mayor of Haven Ridge, he wanted to *own* the town and the people. He wanted to make as much money as he could from them and their hard work. Millie had never cared for Deacon Owens.

There was a ruckus going on in the middle of the wide, dusty street. Millie felt faint as she looked toward the saloon.

*Not Papa. He didn't cause this big of a scene. He couldn't have. This is humiliating!*

Sheriff Roach asked her to remain at the jail station until he could check out what was going on. She nodded and kept a nervously prancing Brandywine away from the crowd. The horse nickered and tossed her head, prancing in a wide circle, wanting to get away from the noise of the shouting people. Millie leaned over and shushed her, patting her neck and rubbing her head. She cooed to the horse, but never took her eyes off the crowd.

Unable to keep the feeling of impending doom from enveloping her, Millie came close to tears again. She couldn't make out any words from the crowd, but deep down, she already knew that somehow, her father had caused the scene in front of The Saloon. She was certain that Isaac had at least played a part in it, if not the key role.

She could hear Sheriff Roach hollering at someone and then addressing the crowd but

still could not make out actual words. Even when the crowd quieted, it wasn't enough. The constant movement and the constant murmur of many voices kept her from hearing him very well. His tone was one of authority, though and she had no doubt that he would get to the bottom of it and settle them down. He always did. Not completely breaking her promise to the sheriff, but unable to keep so far away, she walked her horse a little closer to the scene.

As the sheriff disappeared into the saloon, Millie saw that a man had her father pinned to the ground in front of the thickening crowd. Jumping from her horse, she shouted at the man to let go of her father, but he couldn't hear her over the tumultuous people thronging and vying for a view. The crowd strangled any progress she tried to make toward her father.

After what seemed an eternity, Sheriff Roach reappeared and argued with the man holding her father down. She elbowed and pushed, but each person in the crowd seemed determined to keep her from her goal.

On tiptoe, she watched as the sheriff made his way to the other man and made him step away from her father. The man yelled that there should be a hanging and Millie's body went numb. Her father had done something so terrible this time that it had incited the people to agree with that man loudly. He was one of Deacon's men. There were several of them around and they were all intent on serving justice by way of hanging.

*The injustice! Savages, all of them, savages!* She elbowed harder, anger rising in her and replacing the tears. She had to get to her father before they could do more harm. Moving slowly through the tight throng, she recognized faces and marked them in her memory. Her view of the Haven Ridge residents was altered as they raised their fists toward heaven and shouted out that Isaac should be hanged.

Sheriff Roach cuffed her father and then shouted over the crowd. They began to settle and then to leave. Obviously roused and unhappy about being told to leave, they mumbled together as they walked away



broken into smaller groups. Millie ran through the dispersing crowd, finally able to reach her father. Falling on her knees, she sobbed to see the state of his face. Those lousy men of Deacon's had beaten him badly and she harbored more than a little hate for them.

"Papa, it's Millie, please tell me you're okay." She dusted some of the dirt from his forehead and cheek, causing him to flinch back in pain and she was immediately sorry.

"I'll be fine. Just gotta sleep it off. You're a good daughter." His eyes rolled alarmingly in their sockets as Millie and Sheriff Roach helped him to his feet and Millie feared he would go unconscious before they could get him on a horse.

Inside the jail, Harvey removed Isaac's cuffs and helped him to the cot in the single cell. He had been too drunk to walk straight and after the beating he received at the hands of Deacon's men, he could barely talk.

Drying her tears, Millie sniffled as she looked at her father through the bars of the cell. It was unbelievable that he had fallen so far from the man he was before. *Mama used to say that he was the salt of the earth except for the occasional fisticuff with some of the boys. She also used to say 'boys will be boys no matter their age'.* Millie smiled at the memory and gripped her elbows tightly. What she would give for her mother to be with her still. She was clueless as to what she should do with him, how she should help him all on her own.

Harvey opened a drawer at his desk and dropped Samuel's gun into it. "Miss Thomas?"

Without turning, she said, "Millie, please."

Clearing his throat, Harvey removed his hat and sat on the edge of his desk a few feet from where she stood with her back to him. "Millie," he said, with some effort. She noticed. "I'm afraid this is quite a bit worse than the usual dust-ups Isaac gets into. This is serious. Murder." His voice dropped on the last word, and Millie heard an uneasiness in

his tone.

Still watching her father's fitful, drunken sleep, she shook her head. "He didn't do it." The tears trickled silently down her cheeks and she swiped at them absently.

Sighing, Harvey continued. "There were witnesses, Miss—um, Millie."

Spinning to face him, eyes flaring, she pointed back toward The Saloon. "You call Deacon's men reliable witnesses? They're no more than hired guns, the goons that do Deacon's dirty work and you know it, Sheriff." The sheriff was wrong, and Millie knew it. There was no way her father could have committed murder. Not even in the depths of his despair at her mother's passing could he have fallen so far as to shoot Samuel. She would never believe it.

"Not just Deacon's men, Millie. Jacob Conley was there. He was a witness and his statement matches Carson Morgan's story

perfectly.”

Something inside Millie deflated. It shriveled like a prune and died, leaving an empty pit of despair in her stomach. After a moment, she realized it was hope. If Samuel’s friend Jacob had witnessed the shooting, and he corroborated Carson’s story, it left little doubt. But a little doubt is all Millie needed to still believe in her father’s innocence.

“Sheriff Roach, my father might be a lot of things, but he’s not violent. He doesn’t even carry a gun. He’d never kill anyone.” She stepped toward him and placed a hand on his arm, ensuring she had his full attention. “You have to believe that.”

She believed it. No matter what they said happened, she *knew* that her father could never murder another man, even if the argument was a terrible one. And especially not Samuel Preston. Everyone liked Samuel and his wife, Mary. They had been family friends as long as Millie could remember.

Isaac mumbled in his sleep and then went back to the heavy snoring he had been doing since first hitting the cot.

“Honestly, I feel the same way. I’ve never seen him carry a gun except for a rifle for hunting. I would have never guessed Isaac to be a vicious person even when he was too drunk to walk straight. The occasional brawl was just that, a fist fight that usually lasted a few seconds at best.” He stood and paced the small room, watching Isaac.

Millie thought he must have been debating her father’s innocence.

“My gut tells me there’s something wrong here, but I can’t put my finger on it just yet.” He continued pacing and watching Isaac.

“What are you going to do, Sheriff? Those people out there want to hang Papa. You have to protect him.”

She stood in the center of the room as Sheriff Roach paced. It made her feel like the eye of a tornado as he circled her, his brow furrowed in concentration. Sheriff Roach was a good man, a fair man, and she wished he could see that her father was no murderer. If the gathered mob had their way, they would see Papa hanged by the next day.

“He needs to stay here until he can get a fair trial. That means keeping him safe for several weeks until the circuit judge comes back through.” He shook his head and rubbed his chin. “Deacon’s men will have that crowd riled again by morning and sometime tomorrow. I’m sure they’ll come for him. No way I can fend off all of them.” He stopped pacing and looked to Millie. “And they know that; at least Deacon’s men know that. I need time to think this through and figure out what really happened.”

Harvey took Millie’s elbow and guided her to the bars of the cell. She allowed this without a fuss. “I usually play by the book. Black and white. No gray areas in my world.” He pointed to Isaac. “But this is a huge gray

area right now.”

Millie nodded, feeling that dead thing in her reanimate a tiny bit. ‘Hope blooms eternal’ was another of her mother’s sayings. She nodded at the sheriff again, understanding that he had finally decided to help her prove his innocence.

He pointed to the rear wall planks. “Do you see those planks there with the big gaps between them?”

“Yes.” Her voice came out breathy and barely above a whisper. There were, indeed, large gaps between a few planks at the bottom. She could have easily slid her hand between them.

“With the right tool, they could be pried loose. It would be easy, even for a woman.” He turned her back toward the desk and walked with her, looking out the windows for any eavesdroppers. Seeing none, he continued in a stage-whisper. “Now, I take my morning

walkabout in town around four every morning.” He raised his eyebrows at her. “That means I won’t be in here.” He pointed to the boards of the floor, and her gaze followed.

“Right. Four in the morning.” Her heart beat faster in her chest and the air was suddenly thick and hard to pull into her lungs. The implications of the sheriff’s words were enormous. She did not know what she had been expecting, but that was not it.

He let go of her arm sat on the edge of the desk, crossing his arms over his midsection. “Now, what you do with that information is your business, Miss Thomas. Completely up to you.”

She would be breaking the law. “I understand, Sheriff Roach.” But breaking the law to save her father from an unjust hanging was permissible in her mind. “Could I go in and check his wounds before I leave off for home?”



She wrung her hands nervously, unsure about her decision to break her father out of jail. She had only ever committed one crime in her life. At the age of eight, she had taken an apple from the stall at the market without telling anyone. Not that she had meant to steal it. She saw the apples and was hungry, so she took it and ate it. When her mother found out, she made Millie go back and apologize *and* pay for it.

Millie had never done anything like it again. Her lesson had been learned about breaking the law and breaking the trust of her fellow townspeople. But this was different. If she did not break the law, her father would surely die at the hands of the mob—Deacon's mob. She could never allow that. Even if he had been guilty, she would never allow them to get their hands on him, if she could prevent it.

“I really shouldn't let you in there, but seeing as how he is fast asleep, I don't see what it will hurt. Just be quick. I don't want somebody busting in here and seeing you in there. I normally don't allow anyone in the

cell with the accused.”

He unlocked the door and stood holding it while she bent by the cot, checked the lacerations on his face, and dusted off more dirt. Her father’s face looked terrible with the dirt and blood mixed and drying to his skin. His eye was swollen, and his bottom lip was split in two places. She gingerly dusted loose dirt from his cheek and eyebrow. Using the hem of her apron, she wiped away as much of the muck as she could. Some of the larger cuts began oozing blood again and a sob caught in her throat.

*Poor Papa! If only Mama were here, you wouldn’t be here. You wouldn’t be hurting all the time. You’d stop drinking and you’d be at home, safe, warm, with us.* Fighting to control her emotions in front of the sheriff, Millie wiped a stray tear from her cheek before it could fall. She kissed her father’s grizzled cheek and whispered, “I love you, Papa.”

Making an effort, she turned her face from his and took a deep breath to steady her

nerves. He needed her to be clearheaded, strong, sure of her decision. She couldn't do that if she was sobbing about his pitiful state or mourning her mother and her now-broken family.

When she turned her attention to the wall beyond, she saw from the corner of her eye that the sheriff turned his back to look out over the small room where his desk sat.

Three wide planks at the bottom of the wall were weak. Eyeing them, she pondered the tool she would need to pry them loose quickly. The opening wouldn't be very large when they were pulled out, but she judged that her father would be able to lie on his belly and scoot through without too much trouble if he didn't have internal wounds that prevented him.

Turning back to her father, Millie decided a quick check for broken bones or signs of internal injuries was in order. She had not thought of it at first, only seeing the obvious outward signs of his recent abuse. If he had

internal injuries though, he might not be able to escape.

Pressing on his side, she felt no broken bones and when she rolled him to his back and pressed on his stomach and then his chest, he barely acknowledged it. That was good. No internal injuries. She pressed against his other side and only snuffled and rolled his head toward the wall. No broken bones, apparently.

Turning to Sheriff Roach, she asked, "Would it be too much to ask for a cloth and some water? The cuts are packed with dirt."

Hearing movement outside, he turned abruptly and then shook his head at her, motioning for her to come out of the cell. "I hear someone shuffling around out there, Miss Thomas, I think it would be wise to leave the cleanup for another time." He pushed the cell door shut and locked it as soon as she crossed the threshold.

Hearing boots scuffing the hard dirt of the

road, she pressed a hand to her stomach to quiet the butterflies there and pressed the other to her lips. Sheriff Roach put a finger to his lips and eased toward the door.

More scuffling and a thud at the wall. Sheriff Roach threw the door wide, drew his gun, and stepped to the porch. Millie backed toward the cell. If they were coming for her father, she would fight them. She would die to protect him.

Harvey looked around to find the source of the noises. Two of the Fullerton boys, both teenagers, lit out toward Deacon's place. He didn't think they had heard anything of his and Millie's conversation. They were probably just being nosy, vying for any scrap they could take back to Deacon in exchange for coins. All they would have to report would be Isaac in his cell and Millie tending to his wounds—if they had even seen that.

Millie stood with her back to the cell door holding a piece of iron bar in front of her with both hands. It had been a leftover from

installing the cell bars and Harvey kept meaning to do something with it other than leave it lying in the corner. He couldn't stop the grin. He nodded toward the bar. "You can put that back; it was just a couple of nosy teenagers."

She put the bar aside, glad to have its weight out of her hands. She dusted them on her apron and moved toward the door. "I should get going, then. I've a lot of things to get done." She held out her hand to Sheriff Roach and he took it. "Thank you, Sheriff. I'm not wrong and neither are you." She smiled and walked out.



# Chapter Two

For all its beauty during the daytime, there was an equal amount of terror in the lonesome landscape at night. Riding back home after dark always put Millie on edge. The moon was nearly full and lit the trail nicely, but bandits could hide anywhere in the long, wide swaths of shadow thrown by the landscape. She trusted Brandywine to get her home swiftly; the mare had been a gift from her parents four years ago. A mutual bond had grown between Millie and Brandywine quickly.

Arriving home safely, Millie lit a lantern and carried it to the little room inside the barn where all the tools were stored. She had to find a suitable tool with which to pry those boards loose at the jail. The shovels caught her attention immediately, but she feared they would be awkward to use on such a task. Pitchforks, axes, hammers of all sizes, pick-axes, and scythes all seemed as if they might be able to accomplish the task of prying weak



boards. But nothing seemed quite perfect for the job. She circled the little room, peering into corners, checking behind larger tools.

And then she saw it. It was an old tool that her father had acquired from an old Irish man when she was still a child—a loy. The old man said he had used the loy back in Ireland to manually plow fields when he was younger. Its slim, stout design was as close to perfect as she could find. By putting the thin blade between the planks, she could push up on the handle and pop the lower board out. The handle would have to be shortened from five feet to about two.

She found a saw and placed the handle of the loy over a block of wood. *Papa won't mind. After all, this is going to save his life. It's a fair trade: I ruin an old spade, he gets to live,* she thought as she pulled and pushed the saw over the ash-wood handle.

With the loy's handle shortened, she smiled and stood up. The tool was much lighter with three feet of the handle gone.

Taking the loy to the house, she propped it against the wall by the cookstove. The fresh bread she had baked for supper sat on the warming shelf over the cookstove. She wrapped it in a cheesecloth and set it on the table. She placed her hands on the table and closed her eyes to think.

*Papa will need food, water, a horse, his rifle for hunting, and a bedroll,* she thought, her mind racing as she tried to think of all the necessities. The meat and vegetables she had cooked earlier went into two of Mama's Mason jars. They were the kind with the metal ring and lids and Mama had been delighted when Papa had brought them home to her. She had exclaimed over how much easier they made her job of canning vegetables and fruits.

A sob caught in Millie's chest as she remembered how her mother had loved preserving food. She would line the jars up on the shelves of the pantry and tell Millie how pretty she thought they were. *No time for tears, now; just worry about getting Papa's things together and getting him out of that jail cell,* she reminded herself.

Aloud, Millie said, "The meat and vegetables won't be preserved but at least it will stay fresh for a few days if Papa keeps them cool." She took none of the food for herself even though she had not eaten since early morning. Her insides were too knotted with anxiety for food.

She carefully packed all the food into a saddlebag, wrapped in a small blanket to prevent damage, and then she collected the bedroll, a change of clothes, and matches. She packed the other saddlebag and stood looking around the kitchen for anything else she might add to make her father's time in hiding even a tiny bit more pleasant.

Spying the small coffee tin, she smiled. *Papa loves his coffee*, she thought before packing it in with his clothes. He had a tin plate, fork, and cup that she also packed. The saddlebags were full and she dared not cram another thing in them.

Checking the time, she saw that it was

already a little after midnight. Looking down at her dress, she sighed. It was not proper attire for what lay ahead. Going back to her father's room, she took a pair of his dark trousers and a dark shirt. The clothes felt weird on her body. Next, she found a large, floppy hat and pulled it on over her hair. With the dark colors, she would be harder to see as she worked.

*There, she thought, if anyone sees me from a distance, they will think I'm a boy.* Hoisting the saddlebags over her shoulder, she grunted at their weight. Holding the bedroll under her arm, she reached for the loy. In her other hand, she carried the lantern. It was time to saddle up a horse for her father.

Blue Boy, her father's usual horse and the one he had with him in town, was old. Millie feared he wouldn't be the best choice, especially if Papa had to make a run for it. Blue Boy was slow even at his top speed, which was more akin to a quickened saunter than a gallop.

Bruno, however, was a young, strong dapple-gray Quarter Horse, fast as the wind. She liked Bruno but didn't ride him often. He was much larger than Brandywine and harder to control. With Bruno saddled and loaded with Papa's things, Millie went in the house for one more check of the time. Her window of opportunity would be small, and she didn't want to risk losing it. It was half-past two and she was feeling every minute of her overly long day. She was tired all the way to her bones.

Sitting at the table, she considered where best to hide Papa. Bringing him home was out of the question. It would be the first place everyone would look for him. He could leave the state. Millie decided that would be a last resort. There was an outpost a few miles east of town, but Deacon's men would surely think to check it, too. There were hunter and trapper cabins on the mountain to the south, but they would likely be occupied.

Wilma's Wandering. It was a large ravine about ten miles west of town. Her parents had taken her there as a child. The last trip had

been almost seven years ago. Papa had named it after Mama because of its twists, turns, and beauty. He said if Mama had been a place instead of a woman, that would have been it.

Wilma's Wandering was seemingly endless to her back then. She let her memories take her back there, to that last trip, as she meandered by the creek, gathering smooth, pretty pebbles and her parents laughed and frolicked nearby. Remembering their laughter in the warm summer sun cheered her heart a bit and with her memory came the information she needed.

The creek would provide fresh water and the steep sides, rising far up above the water and close on both sides, would offer protection. The trees grew densely in spots and would make it difficult for any of Deacon's men to spot her father from high ground. The last thing she tied onto Bruno was her father's rifle. She crammed two boxes of ammo into the top of the saddlebag and refastened it, patting Bruno's neck.

“You have a big job ahead of you, Bruno. I know you’ll do fine, though.” She patted him again and he whickered in response.

Holding tight to Bruno’s reins, Millie guided Brandywine off the trail in the midpoint. At first, the horse hesitated, but as Bruno came alongside her, she walked with him off the trail into the thick grass to a copse of trees. Millie tethered Bruno to a small tree and rode Brandywine toward town.

Looking back after only a few seconds of riding, Bruno was completely hidden in the shadows. It was just as she had always known. Those deep, black shadows could conceal any number of dangers. She shivered slightly and it had nothing to do with a chill in the air. The closer she got to Haven Ridge, the faster her heart thrummed in her chest. Unsure of the exact time, she remained on Brandywine as she let the horse graze in the tall grass behind Doctor Renfro’s office which was directly across from the jail. She could watch for Sheriff Roach to leave the jail from there.

The sheriff appeared about twenty minutes later, looking first one direction and then the other as he stepped away from the door. As he turned back to the door, Millie heard the distinct rattle of keys. He was locking the door. Easing alongside Doc Renfro's building and staying in deep shadow, she watched the sheriff head off in the other direction. Making sure he was out of sight, she walked Brandywine across the road and into the shadows behind the jail.

Tiptoeing, she peeked through the small, barred window into the cell. Papa stood at the bars, looking toward the front door.

"Papa," she whispered.

Isaac spun, eyes wide, and moved to the window, grasping the iron bars. "What are you doing here, girl?"

The cuts and bruises on his face looked worse than they had earlier and she feared they were getting infected. "I've come to get



you out. I'm going to pry loose those boards at the bottom. The ones with big gaps between them. See them?" She pointed to the back wall through the bars.

He looked and nodded. "I see them. Sheriff says Deacon's men might come for me, but I didn't kill nobody, Millie."

"Shh! I know Papa. Sheriff Roach knows, too. Just keep a watch out the front for any movement through those windows. Can you do that? Can you see out the front windows?"

"Yes." He moved to the cell door and pressed his face close.

Millie ran around the corner to Brandywine and took the loy. Flipping it over, she slid the long blade between the boards easily. Heaving upward, she heard the first squeaks as the nails gave way. Keeping the pressure, the heel of the loy touched the board above and she shoved the handle toward the wall. With a loud squeal, the nails let go and

the plank flopped out toward her.

The noise was terribly loud to her ears and she stopped, held her breath, and scanned the surroundings for anyone who might have heard. The last thing she wanted was someone coming to investigate the noise. After only a few seconds, she turned her attention back to the boards. Moving up to the second plank, she repeated the process. That board came off easier, but the noise was much louder and she looked over her shoulder again. Still no movement. Maybe no one was close enough to hear it.

The third plank proved the most difficult to pry away. Papa came to the opening. "Wait. I think I can skinny under this. That's making too much noise." He laid flat on his back and with some wiggling and struggling, he was out within seconds.

He got slowly to his feet, in obvious pain, and hugged Millie tightly. His eyes watered up. "I'm so sorry for everything, Millie. I love you so much." He kissed the top of her head

through the floppy hat and hugged her again.

As much as she wanted to enjoy the moment, she knew they must be long gone by the time Sheriff Roach returned. "I love you, too, Papa, but we have to go now. We'll ride double on Brandywine out to the midpoint."

"You look like a boy in those clothes." He shook his head, dismayed that his daughter had dressed in trousers. It would have sent her mother into a tizzy if she had seen it. He understood that she had to disguise herself because of his actions though and it saddened him.

"Yes, Papa, I know. I couldn't do this in a dress though. I don't know how you wear these clothes all the time. They're so uncomfortable." She tugged his hand as she walked around the corner again.

Securing the loy to the saddle, she hopped up and motioned for her father to do the same. She led Brandywine back to the trail

and town soon fell out of sight.

In the midpoint, Millie spoke louder, no longer whispering. “Papa, Deacon’s men and whatever posse they put together will be looking for you. The whole town thinks you shot Samuel Preston dead with his own gun and they will be out to hang you. You have to stay in hiding until Sheriff Roach can figure this mess out.” She guided a skittish Brandywine off the path again and headed for the trees.

“I don’t rightly know where to go, Millie.” Papa dismounted with difficulty and stood rubbing his side.

“Do you remember how to get to Wilma’s Wandering?” She dismounted and stood facing her father. The lines on his face had deepened with age, but he was still handsome. He was just hollower with his sunken eyes and cheeks and now bruises lay ugly and dark around his eyes and left temple, accentuated by the cuts and scrapes.

“It’s been years since I thought of that place.” He sniffled and Millie knew he was close to crying. “Yeah, I remember how to get there.”

He looked so weak, defeated, and broken that Millie wanted to comfort him, offer him words of hope and promises that it would all be okay, but they didn’t have time for it and she wasn’t sure if everything would be okay or not.

“Good. Go there. I’ve packed you a canteen of water, food, clothes, just about anything you will need should be somewhere on Bruno. Once you get there, don’t leave unless you have to run from Deacon’s men. I’ll come fetch you when it’s safe. But if Deacon’s men come after you, you promise me that you’ll run as far as you need to, even if it means leaving Colorado.” Tears stung her eyes. She didn’t want her father to leave the state, but she didn’t want the others to find him either.

He hugged her. “I’m not leaving you. No

way. If our good Sheriff Roach figures out the truth and clears my name, I'll be in Wilma's Wandering. If Deacon's men come after me, that's still where I'll be. I'm not going to abandon my only daughter. I've done enough harm over this last year. It's time I started making it right again." He held her at arms' length and held her face between his big weathered hands, their roughness giving her a small amount of comfort. "I'm sorry for this terrible mess, but I swear on my life and on your dear mother's grave that I did *not* kill Samuel Preston. Sam and Mary are good people. I could never do that, Millie."

Wiping her tears away, Millie nodded. "Did you see who did kill him?"

Looking down at the ground, he shook his head miserably. "I was blind drunk... again. And me and Carson was arguing part of the time, too. I blacked out while we were fighting. I don't know for how long, but I didn't even know Sam was there. Jacob was there though. He should have seen what happened. And Clyde, the bartender. Clyde don't ever miss anything that goes on in The

Saloon.”

He had been so drunk that he had trouble standing. Carson had come in and started mouthing at him about Wilma’s passing and how he should be moving on, getting over it. The rudeness turned to an argument, and that escalated to a brawl. Swinging wildly at the man, Isaac had stumbled into the bar and fell to the floor twice as his tormentor poked fun at him. Dragging himself to his feet for the third time, he blacked out. His memory was blank until Wade had him face-down in the dirt outside The Saloon.

Millie knew her father was right. Clyde never missed anything in his bar. He was also on Deacon’s payroll, so he couldn’t be trusted to tell the truth even under the threat of death. None of Deacon’s men could be trusted. But Jacob Conley, he and Samuel had been friends as long as Millie could remember. Everyone knew that. And Jacob was not on Deacon’s payroll any more than Samuel had been. And if Jacob had agreed that her father had pulled the trigger, then she wasn’t sure what to believe.

“Papa, you have to go now. The sun will be coming up soon.” She pointed to the eastern horizon where lavender and pink rays were shooting through the clouds above the mountain. The sun wouldn’t be far behind.

He nodded and mounted Bruno. “I love you, Millie. Whatever happens, you hold to that truth. I never meant for any of this to happen. And I swear I didn’t kill Sam. You tell Mary for me.”

Millie mounted Brandywine. “I will, Papa.” She turned toward home with her heart burdened heavier than it had been before and the day ahead looked to be another long one for her.

Back home, she hurried inside and scrubbed herself clean, brushed and re-pinned her hair, and put on a plain blue dress fit for chores. Usually, she cared very little for the taste of coffee, but she knew she would need to look more awake than she could accomplish naturally. There was a small amount of coffee



left in the bag Papa had bought in town last month and she used it, hanging the bag over its nail in the pantry post to use again next time they bought grounds from Mr. Mercer's General Store.

Later, she walked through the house to make sure everything was in order. She didn't want anyone to look through the house and see something that might make them think she had busted her father out of jail. She folded the set of clothes she had worn and tucked them neatly into drawers. It was unlikely that anyone would notice the missing rifle and ammunition or the missing coffee tin. Only close friends and Millie would notice such things, she was sure.

In the pantry, she gathered her mother's old vegetable basket and headed out to the garden. There were green beans, tomatoes, and okra that needed picking. That is what she would be doing on a normal day, so that's where she headed. *It's best if anyone comes snooping that I'm outside tending to my chores,* she thought.

The sun was bright and warm. Twenty minutes among the bean vines and Millie was ready to doze on her feet. The coffee had helped, but the effects had been short-lived. She thought about Mary Preston. Samuel's widow now. What would she be doing? *Mourning, of course. Poor Mary*, she thought and swiped at a stray tear.

She wanted to give Mary the message from Papa. That was probably a bad idea considering others would be nearby, supporting her through her grief. If the wrong person overheard, they might figure out that her father had been too drunk to tell her that when he was locked up and that he had told her after his breakout of jail. It was too risky.

Another tear escaped and she put the basket on the ground and used both hands to wipe her face. Looking up at the sky, she breathed deep of the clean, fresh smell of her growing vegetables, forcing a smile. Taming her emotions was of paramount importance. Forcing her mind to her chores, Millie fought the urge to sit in the shade and nap. She picked enough beans to do for three days'

worth of meals and then moved to the okra and tomatoes.



# Chapter Three

Luke rode into Haven Ridge, tired from trailing his latest bounty, Deke Halliday, who was supposedly hiding out in New Mexico. His original plan had been to just pass through Haven Ridge, staying only a single night. He was ready for a hot meal, a cold drink, and a soft bed. He had already been on Deke's trail for several days. But the noise from the crowd drew him toward the jail. He neared but remained in the saddle, listening to the commotion.

As the crowd quieted a tiny bit, Sherriff Harvey Roach noted another man riding into town. He was lanky, tall in his saddle, and new to Haven Ridge. He knew everyone in town, and most of the outliers as well, but he had never seen this man. As he moved closer, Harvey took in his lean, hungry look as well as his relaxed slump in the saddle which only looked natural to men who were accustomed to long days on horseback. If he didn't miss his guess, the man was a bounty hunter. If he had

been on the lam from the law, he wouldn't possess such an easy manner and obvious curiosity about the ruckus. He would have avoided such scenes.

Wade sidled his horse close to the porch. He shoved his hat up from his brow and grinned evilly at Harvey. "Looks like the general consensus here is to have Isaac face justice. Now. Not in a few weeks. He doesn't deserve to sit in that cell and be coddled by you and his sweet little daughter for weeks while Samuel's rotting in his grave, waiting for justice." He leaned over and spit tobacco juice onto the boards in front of Harvey's boots.

Looking at the tobacco juice, Harvey thought, *A few years ago I would have pistol-whipped you for such impertinence.* Aloud, he said, "Wade, I already told you, there won't be any vigilante hanging. Besides, he's gone." One of them would have seen the hole in the back wall soon enough, so there was no need to keep it a secret any longer.

"What do you mean, he's gone?" Wade's

voice boomed and hush fell over the gathered men.

Taking a deep breath, Harvey put his hands on his hips. "I said he's gone and that's just what I meant. He broke out while I was taking my walk through town this morning. I just found out when I got back here."

A rider was coming from the same direction that the Fullerton boys had gone toward the night before. It was Deacon Owens. He rode up and dismounted, joining Harvey on the porch. He was the last person Harvey wanted to deal with, but alas!

Deacon was a weathered, hard man with cunning, always-searching eyes. Harvey had never liked the man, seeing him for what he really was: a back-stabbing, money-hungry, power-seeking snake in the grass. He always had ulterior motives rattling around behind his pretty words and slick personality. And as if he were watching a snake, Harvey stepped away as Deacon moved to his side.

Hooking his thumbs into his belt loops, Deacon surveyed the crowd. “What’s going on here, Sheriff? Seems you got a hole in the back wall of your little jail station here and a mad crowd in front of it.” He flashed Wade a tiny grin and even tinier nod, but Harvey didn’t miss either of them.

“Well, Mr. Owens, just like I was telling your boys here, Isaac Thomas has escaped. He was long gone when I returned from my walk around town this morning.”

Someone from the crowd yelled, “Or you let him out!”

“Yeah!” The word came from several of the gathered men. They held their rifles in the air and grumbled loudly.

Deacon turned his searching gaze on Harvey. “He just busted out the back wall and left, huh?”



Holding his gaze, Harvey nodded. “Seems that way.”

The crowd grew louder and Harvey yelled, “Quiet down, people! Hold it down or I’m going to ask you disperse.”

Wade cleared his throat. “Mr. Owens, I say that me and the boys take this group of concerned citizens out and hunt him down. He’s a cold-blooded murderer and shouldn’t be running loose endangering the good folks of Haven Ridge.”

Harvey fought the urge to drag Wade from his saddle and beat him. The wind blew toward Harvey and he could smell the alcohol from the men. They had already been drinking, no doubt at Wade’s place. “Hold on, now. I’ve not deputized any of them and I won’t. I can smell the liquor on them from here.”

“Now, *you* hold on there, Harvey.” Deacon waved his finger at the sheriff and continued,

“Wade has a point. Isaac’s dangerous. He already killed Sam Preston. He has to be brought back. As of this moment, that should be your number one priority as sheriff of this fine town. It’s why you were named sheriff. And if Wade, Boomer, and Tad are willing to help you out, I don’t think you’re in a position to oppose that. This very same crowd helped put you in your position.”

Harvey thought that was a veiled threat against his job and it heated his blood. Biting back on his anger, he watched the silent interactions between Deacon and his men. While his attention was on them, a loud clatter behind him made Harvey spin, reaching for his gun.

“Don’t shoot me, Sheriff.” Carson laughed and held up his hands. “I’m just here to see what all the fuss is about and I’m guessing it has something to do with that hole in the back wall and the missing prisoner. The missing *murderer*.”

That stirred the mob again and Harvey

turned on them. “All right. You need to take your guns and go back home. This situation is under control and I don’t need anyone’s help today. Thank you!”

Carson nodded to Wade, who immediately began his rabble-rousing again, inciting the crowd to further bloodlust. This time, Deacon raised his hands and hushed the people. “Now, don’t y’all worry none about this situation. I give you my solemn promise that I will look into this most urgent matter personally. *I* will see that Isaac is brought to swift justice. I’ll take care of you just like I always have.” He smiled and it was an oily smile that made Harvey’s gut tighten.

After the crowd dispersed and he’d heard everything he needed to hear, the new arrival to the town, Luke, gave the people a wide berth as he rode down the street toward the saloon. Harvey hoped the man was not going to be any trouble. The whole town seemed to be strung high at the moment and it wouldn’t take much to set them into a frenzy.

Luke rode toward the saloon to see if he could scratch up a good meal and a room for the night. If he was lucky, there would be someone there who could fill him in on the escape. If there was to be a reward, he might be inclined to stay a few days more. Besides, letting a murderer run free wasn't right. At least not in Luke's mind. Since he had been old enough to fight back, he had never let violent outlaws run free to do as they pleased.

Both his parents had been murdered by outlaws when he had been just a boy. He had spent the rest of his life trying to make up for what he should have done that day—prevented the death of his parents. It was a burden of guilt he had carried through his life, weighing him down and filling his nights with visions of the aftermath. Eventually, that led to sleepless nights. His days were spent moving from one place to another in search of the worst of the worst. He hadn't kept the outlaws from killing his parents, but he also wouldn't allow another family to be torn asunder by some rogue outlaw on the loose if he could stop him.

Walking through the batwing doors into the saloon, Luke paused to take in his surroundings as he did with every new place he entered. Being a bounty hunter earned him more than one enemy over the years and he never let his guard down; that would be a weakness easily exploited by a watchful enemy and a chance he wouldn't take. Within a few seconds, he was able to gather enough information to feel comfortable in the saloon. Two tables to his left were being utilized for poker games. Another three, farther ahead on that side, sat several men drinking, eating, and pawing at the saloon girls who giggled and tottered over them. To his right, two empty tables at the front and two tables at the back with only three men sitting at them, drinking. The barstools were empty and the barkeep eyed Luke questioningly.

Luke stepped up to the right side of the bar, leaving only three men to his back, and the batwing entrance to his left. The barkeep finished cleaning a glass, tossed the towel over his shoulder and walked slowly to Luke.

“What can I get for you, stranger?” The

older man gave only a hint of a smile as he eyed Luke. He was merely checking out the stranger with a big gun strapped to his hip. There was no particular interest in his stare.

*Small towns, Luke thought, they can spot a stranger a mile away.* “A shot of whiskey and a beer.” Luke didn’t strain to be overly nice. He had learned early in life that being nice only made people suspicious of his motives.

The barkeep brought the drinks and set them in front of Luke. “Anything else for you?”

Luke emptied the shot glass and slid it back to the man. The burn slithered down his throat, into his empty gut, and set it to roiling. The relaxing effects of the liquor were almost immediate. “Another shot, for starters. Thanks.” He emptied the second shot and relished the warmth spreading through his body as he let his overtaxed muscles relax a bit. He slid the glass back again. “Can I get a meal?”

“We serve beans and cornbread all day. Potatoes, too. If you want meat, it’ll be ready for supper and that’s a few hours away still.” This time he grinned. It was a crooked grin as if the muscles in one side of his face didn’t work so well.

“Beans, potatoes, and cornbread will be fine.” He would have settled for only the beans at that point. He had been living off dried beef for the last three days.

Glancing to the mirror above the bar, Luke saw the three men were looking him over. He saw that same wary curiosity in almost every town where he stopped. At some point, it had stopped bothering him so much. It was just part of the job now. That wasn’t to say that he had gotten used to it, but he expected it and was only surprised if it didn’t happen.

The barkeep brought the food and slid it to Luke. He started to turn away.

Anxious to dig in, Luke shoved a spoonful

of beans into his mouth and regretted it. They were hot as fire. Quickly, he washed them down with his beer, eyes watering up.

The barkeep grinned. "Might wanna let those cool for a minute. Fresh out of the pot." He nodded toward the plate and chuckled, but there was nothing mean about the sound, it had just struck him funny that Luke hadn't had sense enough to realize the beans were fresh out of the pot even with the steam rolling off them.

"Warning's a little late. Thanks." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and pushed the plate aside for the time. "Say, what's all the commotion at the jail about?" If anyone in the saloon knew, it would be the barkeep. He seemed the type that didn't miss much and bars were a good source for local gossip.

The barkeep blinked at him momentarily and then cleared his throat. He pointed to a spot across the bar. "You see that spot right there? That big dark stain?"



Luke stood and stepped over to see where the man pointed. Indeed, there was a dark stain on the floorboards. He nodded.

“There was a man shot dead right there last night. The man who did the shootin’ has escaped the sheriff’s lockup. No doubt about it, there’ll be a reward for his capture.” The barkeep pulled the towel from his shoulder, eyed Luke suspiciously for a moment, and then turned back to cleaning glasses again.

Sitting to his meal, Luke thought his arrival in Haven Ridge had been fortuitous after all. It wouldn’t hurt to secure a room for a few days, see what would become of the escaped murder situation.

“Can I ask another question?” Luke paid the barkeep for the meal and drinks.

“Where can you get a room and a bath?” He grinned at Luke’s shocked expression. “Looks like you been in the saddle for a while,

mister. Never seen you before, so I figured you wanted a place to rest and clean up.”

Scratching at the stubble on his face, Luke chuckled. “And you would be correct.”

“Go out the door, take a left and follow Main Street almost to the end. Maisy’s is on the right. Best hotel around—only one, in fact.” He stuck out his hand. “My name’s Clyde McCormick, by the way. You got a name, so I don’t have to keep calling you ‘mister’?”

Luke shook his hand. “Luke Houston. Glad to make your acquaintance, Clyde. Thanks for the food, drink, and the information.”

Luke headed to Maisy’s, eager to get a bath and some shut-eye. Maisy’s was clean, smelled of fresh flowers, and the price was reasonable. After checking in, Luke went to his room. Millicent, the lady who ran the place, stood by the door demurely waiting to see if he approved.

“Sir, is the room to your liking?” She asked in her small voice.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” Luke smiled at her. She was pretty and reminded him of his mother. *Mama was about her age when...* Luke didn’t let the thought play out. It was best not to. He tossed his saddlebags on the floor at the end of the bed.

“Good. The bath is downstairs. Greta can draw you a hot bath and have it ready within the hour if you like.” She looked questioningly at him.

“That would be nice, Miss Millicent.”

“Would you like a meal while you’re waiting?” She glanced about the room and then down the hall as if she were becoming nervous.

“No, thank you. I ate already. I just want a

bath and some sleep for a while.” He walked to the door. She stepped out and bobbed a quick curtsy as she headed for the stairs.

*Mama wasn't as skittish as Millicent, but they sure have similar looks, he thought. Right down to the way she winds her hair into a loose bun at the nape of her neck.* He went to the window and looked out over the town. It was so much like the other little towns he stopped in. Small towns are full of hardworking men and women trying to carve out a future in the still-new lands. He could respect that, but it was far from him to want to put down roots anywhere. At least not yet.

As far as he could see, he would never live a stationary life; it would drive him mad. He had lived abroad with no home for longer than he cared to think about.



# Chapter Four

After the crowd dispersed, placated by Deacon's promise to look into the situation on his own, Harvey stepped into his office and breathed a sigh of relief. It was short-lived, though. Deacon followed him into the office and walked to the little stove, a self-satisfied smile on his face, and poured himself a cup of Harvey's coffee. Harvey sat in his chair at the desk wishing Deacon would leave him to his business, but knowing that wouldn't happen any time soon.

Deacon reclined in his seat and grinned over his coffee. "So, what do you plan on doing about this situation, Sheriff? Seems you've really messed up this time." He turned up the coffee.

"I'm not shouldering the responsibility for this. You know full well that I've been asking for a more permanent solution for the jail for the past year. It's not my fault that you won't come up with the funds for it. It's not like

you'd miss the money and we both know it."

"I'm not the one who let a murderer escape, am I?" Deacon thumped the cup down on the desk.

"Alleged murderer, Deacon. Alleged." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "And I didn't let him escape." He pointed to the back wall of the cell. "You see that? That's how he got out. The boards have been pried loose. So, it all boils down to your lack of funding for a stronger jail, don't you think?" Harvey kept his tone even and his expression neutral.

Deacon sat forward again, glaring as he placed his coffee on the desk. "You best back up and regroup, Sheriff. Don't throw accusations around like that." He stood and hooked his thumbs into his belt loops in what Harvey was beginning to think of as his trademark stance. "You're on thin ice, accusing me of being at fault here. You'd do well to remember who your boss is. Now, I want Isaac tracked down and brought in so

justice can be served.” He stalked back toward the door and stopped short of opening it.

“I plan on tracking him down *and* seeing that he’s brought to trial for the crime he’s accused of.” Harvey rose from his seat.

When Deacon turned, he had a cunning look in his eyes. “Well, just to ensure that he’s found quick, I’m putting up a thousand-dollar bounty on Isaac’s head. That should speed up the search, don’t you think?”

“And just think, if you had put that thousand dollars toward a stronger jail, we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now. Would we?” Harvey knew he was pushing his luck.

Deacon pointed at him. “Boy, you’re on really thin ice right now. Get Isaac back here, *pronto*.”

“Is this how you’re looking into the



situation, Deacon? That is what you promised that mob out there, that you would personally look into the situation. With that big bounty landing on Isaac's head, well that seems to me like you're just hiring thugs to do your dirty work for you." Harvey stared at Deacon levelly without blinking, challenging him to deny it.

Laughing evilly, Deacon shook his head. "You know, I never wanted you in this position. I never tried to hide it, either. You don't fit here, Harvey, and you seem to have a real problem with authority."

"And your vigilance gang did? That was nothing more than organized vigilante justice; no town can thrive under the control of a bunch of hooligans who band together to determine what justice is according to their own needs. There has to be some sort of law that applies to everyone and can make unbiased decisions based on what's best for the town."

"It was a committee, not a gang of hooligans. And Haven Ridge thrived just fine

before you got here.” Deacon gritted his teeth. Harvey had caused him a lot of aggravation and grief since being elected, but he wouldn’t let one do-gooder stand his way or get the better of him. “I’m posting that bounty immediately. How does that suit your idea of unbiased decisions?”

With that, Deacon flung open the door and stomped out without bothering to close it again.

Calling after him, Harvey said, “That’s right, Deacon. You never were one for getting your hands dirty.” Deacon never failed to make his blood boil. The man only cared about himself and getting rich; he would crush anyone or anything that stood in his way without losing a minute of sleep over it. But he was an expert at keeping his hands clean.

With Deacon gone, Harvey rushed out of the office and headed for the Thomas homestead. He had to tell Millie about the bounty. No matter where Isaac was hiding, he wouldn’t remain safe for very long. If he didn’t

miss his guess, that's exactly what Deacon wanted.

He found Millie under the oak tree between the garden and the house. She startled when he rode up and he thought she had been asleep. A basket of fresh vegetables sat at her side.

“Oh! Sheriff Roach.” She struggled to her feet, straightening her clothes and patting at her hair. “I was resting for a moment.” The sun had passed the mid-heaven point, letting her know that she had been there more than a moment. The heavy feeling of her body and the sluggishness in her mind were all the evidence she needed to know she had slept for well over an hour.

Smiling, Harvey looked to the basket of vegetables. “Looks like you’ve earned a rest, Miss, um, I mean, Millie.” He didn’t know that he would ever get used to calling her by her first name.

She craned her neck to look around the front of the house to the road. He seemed to be alone, so she thought she could relax a bit. Whispering, she asked, "Are you alone?"

"Yes, ma'am. I needed to talk to you privately. It's about your father and Deacon Owens."

"Yes. I came to the jail this morning after you went on your walkabout and—"

Holding out his hand, Harvey shushed her, shaking his head. "No, Millie, don't tell me what you did or didn't do. The fewer details I know, the better off we all are. If I don't know, I can't accidentally give it away. Understand?" *Or if I'm under duress, I can't let it slip*, he wanted to add but didn't want to alarm her. He did, however, believe that Deacon was vile enough to torture anyone who had information he wanted.

She nodded. She wanted him to tell her it was okay and everything would be all right,

but he looked as if he weren't sure of that himself. That upset her and made her fearful.

"I'll ask some questions and you just answer with a yes or a no." The sheriff scanned the property around them as if he were looking for someone.

Nodding, Millie followed his gaze, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. It didn't put her anymore at ease, though. She reckoned her days of being easy in her mind were long gone.

"Is Isaac safe?" He asked as he brought his gaze back to her.

"For now, yes." She wanted to tell him about Wilma's Wandering and about how scared she was and how sorry Papa was for the whole mess, but she held back.

"Good, good. Okay, will he be able to stay in hiding for an extended amount of time, if

necessary?”

Thinking on it, she nodded. In the ravine, he should be able to find sufficient shelter. He could fish and hunt, as well.

“Good. I just spoke with Deacon and he is posting a thousand-dollar bounty on Isaac’s head, Millie. Whatever happens, he must stay in hiding. Do you understand? You can’t go to him at all. Not even once. The chance of someone seeing you is too great.” Not only would that endanger Isaac, but it would also most definitely endanger her as well.

“With a bounty like that, every bounty hunter in the state will be looking for Papa. Isn’t there something you can do to stop Deacon from posting it?” She knew there wasn’t, but she had to ask. She had to have hope. Without hope, all was lost.

“I’m sorry, Millie. Truly, I am. I wish there was something I could do to stop him, but I can’t. He made the bounty that high so that

word would spread quickly and lessen our chances of seeing Isaac safely to a trial. At least that's what my gut tells me and it's usually right." His gut had never been wrong before.

"From what I know about bounty hunters, they don't care about anything or anyone. All they care about is the reward money. They're awful people to be around, too. You can't trust them." In her limited experience, she had met a couple of bounty hunters and recalled absolutely nothing decent about them. "Why would Deacon set them on Papa? He never did anything to deserve that. He always left Deacon alone."

Harvey nodded. "I'm sure he did. Most people don't want to have any dealings with Deacon at all. And, I don't know why he seems to have it in for Isaac, except that he was the perfect scapegoat. It's easy to pin something on a man who's too drunk to know what's going on." Immediately, he regretted his words. "I'm sorry—"

Millie shook her head and cut him off. "No, it's okay. I understand. It's harsh, but it's also true." Her heart broke a little. That her father had fallen so low in people's opinions was terrible, but that he had caused it was worse.

"Still, I'm sorry. I should have chosen my words more carefully. It was rude." He had never mastered the art of being sensitive. He was used to being around men, rough men, usually outlaws or lawbreakers that had no use for anything sensitive. With those kinds of men, he had to be rough and rude to get through to them.

The past year seemed to catch up with her all at once and Millie felt as if she weighed a thousand pounds. The heat was stifling, her dress seemed to constrict around her, and the sun was too bright. "No apology necessary." She shaded her eyes against the sunlight with one hand. "I'm going to start supper soon, would you care to join me, Sheriff?" She forced a cheery expression.



“I can’t, but thank you for the offer. I have to be getting back to work to look into this. I want to figure out what’s really going on and what Deacon has to do with it.” After posting such a high bounty, Harvey was more certain than ever that Deacon was hiding something. That reward money would draw attention away from him and toward Isaac. As sheriff, he wanted to see what everyone else missed. It was his job.

“All right. Thank you for telling me about the bounty.” She raised her hand in parting and was secretly glad that he had declined to stay for a meal. She liked the sheriff, respected him too, but she needed to be alone with her thoughts and feelings for a while.

As she walked back to the house, she spotted the little whorls of dust kicked up by the sheriff’s horse that marked his progress back toward Haven Ridge. The Thomas name had been respected in all of Haven Ridge until a couple of months after her mother died.

Speaking aloud, Millie moved slowly

toward the house. "I'm sorry, Mama, I just couldn't help him. I didn't know how." Disappointed with herself, but more disappointed with her father, Millie went to the kitchen and set her vegetables on the table.

She separated her take from the garden and began washing them. She laid them on towels spread over the counter to dry. The beans and tomatoes were the prettiest she had seen in a few years. They were unblemished reminders that not everything in life was complicated—not everything had been tainted by the recent incident.

Standing in the kitchen with her world trying its best to crumble around her, Millie decided to make stew. Stew with meat was a time-consuming endeavor, but worth the wait if it was done right. Beef stew had been the one thing her mother had taught her to cook that they considered better than the everyday meals of vegetables with a bit of dried meat or salted pork.

Humming, she took the last of the beef from the cold cellar and made a mental note that stored meat would have to be salted or dried for an indefinite amount of time. The ice had melted under the sawdust and the temperature wouldn't preserve the meat.

She could have gone to town and bartered with Mr. Green for more blocks of ice, but the pity in his eyes at her situation made her skin crawl. She hated pity. Though Mr. Green never meant to make her feel bad, he always did. She had very little money saved back and it was to be used at the end of warm weather for items she would need to get through winter.

If the situation with her father drew out longer than expected, then preserving meat for winter would be another way to divert her attention from the problem. As she cut the meat into small pieces, she had an epiphany. Keeping busy was what kept most women sane through the toughest of times. It had to be. Now that she was an adult and had been going through the hardest year of her life so far, she realized that the harder life hit her, the more

work she made for herself. Sometimes, at bedtime, she was literally asleep as soon as she laid down.

But did she want the rest of her life to be filled with busy work? She didn't think so. Eventually, she wanted a family. As she melted lard in a skillet, she wondered just how long she had before she was considered an old maid and no man would want her.

Carefully, she placed the beef into the skillet. Sighing inwardly, she pushed stray strands of hair away from her forehead. *If it's meant to be, it will be*, she thought as she tried to envision her future children. *What would my days be like, if I had babies? What chores would I be doing right now, if I were expecting my husband home for supper tonight?*

Letting her daydreams and fancies play out, she remained mostly distracted from the nauseating worry over her father's predicament. When she had put the grease into a large pot and cleaned the skillet, she cut potatoes and placed them in a bowl. As she

took carrots from the root cellar, she took a quick inventory of what she had. Her stock looked sufficient, considering it wouldn't be long until she harvested more vegetables to add to it.

She cleaned and cut the carrots to add to the stew and then began making what her mother had called stew gravy. She added flour and seasonings to the grease, stirring it constantly until it turned a rich, dark brown. Then she added two quarts of water, the vegetables, and meat. There was no written recipe and it had been a long time since she had attempted making the stew, but it smelled right.

Pleased, she moved on to other chores. Soon, she began to think about her father out there in the ravine alone. She wondered what he would eat for his supper. Was he hungry? Was he in pain? Were his wounds infected?

She felt guilty about getting so carried away with her childish daydreams while her father was out there on his own with no shred

of happiness to ease his mind. How long would it take for bounty hunters to descend on Haven Ridge once word of the bounty got out? She was sure it would happen quickly. Especially when the hunters realized that Isaac wasn't some fearsome killer—it would be easy money for some man.

“Why did you have to keep drinking, Papa?” she asked the empty kitchen. *And why did you have to leave us, Mama?* she wondered.

She had time to feed the animals and take a walk before supper was done. Not wanting to stay inside and do more chores in the empty house, she added a bit more water to the stew and left quickly.



# Chapter Five

After a hot bath and a few hours of the best sleep he'd had in weeks, Luke headed back to the saloon for a couple of reasons. He wanted another drink for one and he wanted to ask Clyde about that bounty for another. Clyde seemed to be a man in the know; nothing would get past him. From his years of traveling, Luke had learned to pick out the people who knew things of interest to him and how to avoid the troublemakers, the double-dealers, and other riffraff.

Reading a person was second nature to him. The process was part instinct, but mostly relied on his ability to gather information from a person's body movement, the shift of their eyes, or the lack thereof, and unintentional tics—the same things that often gave away men in poker games. Everybody had a tell. It didn't matter if it was poker or life in general, everybody had them. He had simply learned to read them better than most.



Stepping up to the bar, Luke grinned at Clyde, who immediately came over. "I almost didn't recognize you." Clyde rubbed his own face, indicating Luke's freshly shaven one.

"Yeah. I guess scrubbing off the trail dirt and shaving off the grizzle does change a man's appearance." Luke sat. "Shot of whiskey, please." He felt eyes on him. He was the stranger in town and everyone had to get a look at him. He liked to tell himself that he was used to it, but a man never quite got completely comfortable with others staring at him and sizing him up from every angle.

"Did you get a room at Maisy's?" Clyde poured the liquor. The stranger didn't look like a regular cowpoke or rancher. There was energy coming off him like he was dangerous but smart about it so as not to call attention to it. Usually, it was easy for him to call a man's profession just by looking at him, but not Luke.

"Yes. It was the best sleep I've had in weeks." Luke killed the shot and ordered

another. Two shots and a beer, that's what he always ordered and that's usually all the alcohol he allowed himself in one day. It wasn't wise to be bleary-eyed and stumbling drunk in his line of work.

A short, red-haired saloon girl ambled over to him, taking him in from head to toe without blinking. "Well, how do, stranger?"

Luke nodded to the pretty woman, noting that her lipstick was thick and overly bright, and her hair was in need of grooming. "How do, yourself, ma'am?" He gave her a sideways look, not wanting to engage in conversation with her.

Sidling up next to him, she ran a finger from his shoulder to his elbow. "You lookin' for a good time, sugar?" She twirled one of her frizzy curls around the finger of her other hand.

"Can't say I am. Just here for a few drinks." He moved his arm as she made a

move to caress him again. He didn't want to be rude but had no interest in her. Experience had taught him to nip it in the bud with saloon girls or they became relentless.

Her brows drew together and she put her hands on her scantily clad hips. "What? You don't like what you see?" She bopped her hip to the side and wiggled her shoulders enticingly.

Turning his gaze full on her, he took off his hat, placing it on the stool by his side. "I'm just here for a few drinks." He put a touch more authority into his voice and gave her a firm look. Her diminutive stature and her too-thin build offered him little in the way of temptation. He preferred his women to have a few curves. Women were supposed to be soft to hold and pleasing to look at.

Her cheeks flamed instantly as she dropped her come-hither act and pointed at him. "Why, you—"

Clyde interjected, cutting off the rest of her sentence. "Rose, you go on and leave this fella be. He said he weren't interested in nothing but drinks." He flapped his hand at her as if shooing away a bothersome fly. "Go on now. There's plenty of other men in here tonight."

"Ain't none of them worth the bother; I thought maybe Mr. Too Good here might have a bit of coinage he wanted to spend. Better on me than on your tasteless beans." She pouted her lips out at Clyde and stepped toward Luke.

"Leave him alone, Rose!" The barkeep's bushy brows rose, giving his aged features a slightly menacing look. He shooed her again and she stomped back to the other side of the room. He turned away to get the liquor. "Sorry about that."

"No problem." Luke took the opportunity to look over the other men in The Saloon. Most seemed to be relaxing, probably after long hours in the fields or laboring at the sawmill he had seen on the southeast side of

Haven Ridge, lying just far enough out that it wouldn't disturb business in town.

"Hey, you know that bounty we was talking about earlier?" Clyde spoke in a low voice, leaning over the bar in a conspiratorial manner.

"Yeah. I was going to ask you about it. Did it post yet?" Luke threw back the shot and ordered a beer.

"You bet it did. There's a thousand-dollar bounty on old Isaac's head. It's a real shame how all this turned out. Mostly for Miss Millie. She's Isaac's daughter. Sweetest gal you ever care to meet, just like her ma. Isaac went bad after Wilma died, though." He shook his head sadly. Many times, he had thought how lucky Isaac had been to have such a beautiful and hardworking wife. There had been a time when he had been envious of Isaac then Wilma had died. Clyde definitely didn't envy Isaac the grief he surely went through then.

“Some men do that, Clyde. He wouldn’t be the first to lose his bearings after losing his wife and I’m sure he won’t be the last.” He once knew a healthy, vigorous man who lost his wife and went on to die himself within a year. Everyone said he had died of a broken heart. Love was a funny thing. It could put the worst of men on the right track, but if it was taken away, it could also put the best of men on a path of self-destruction.

“I know. Isaac was good people until Wilma died. After that, he’s been nothing but trouble. Almost every night, he’s getting drunk and roughing it up with somebody. All he wanted to do was rabble-rouse and fight and drink.” Clyde stepped back from the bar, thinking he had finally nailed down the look of the stranger. “Say, you’re a bounty hunter, ain’t you?”

“I am.” Luke waited, knowing there would be more added to the story now that the man was sure about his profession.

“Uh-huh. I knew it! You just had that look

about you. Still do. You're a man who's killed in the past and wouldn't be afraid to kill again in the future. So, I guess you work for the money." Clyde grinned. It was lopsided but genuine.

"No. I never take a job just for the money. I take jobs to bring in the worst of the criminals, those who are a danger to innocent folks." Others at the bar had begun taking an interest in the conversation and a few moved to closer stools with their drinks.

Clyde nodded. "Right, right. You're one of them what has morals and such." He chuckled as if he didn't believe that. He had never known a bounty hunter who had many morals. Some of them wouldn't hurt women or kids, but that was about as far as morals went in their profession.

The man closest to Luke chuckled into his beer glass, took a long drink, and set it down. "Son, we all had morals at one time, too. It don't take a man long to lose those out here."

A handful of others laughed. Then the stories started up. It seemed that each man had at least one story about bounty hunters that he couldn't wait to share. The talk turned into more laughs as they made their respective points about losing morals in the untamed West.

Luke didn't laugh. He lived by his morals. He didn't just wave them around like some fine possession for the world to take notice of. They defined him and it was a strict code that kept him alive and kept others safe from the criminals he hunted down. Without morals, he would be just another outlaw.

After a few minutes, the men went back to their drinking and Luke's side of the bar quieted considerably. Clyde wiped the bar in front of Luke absently. "How'd you just happen to end up here in Haven Ridge in the middle of nowhere on the day Isaac Thomas busted out?" It was odd and Clyde had to wonder if Deacon was behind it. Maybe he had sent word, bringing in the bounty hunter as a backup plan to make sure Isaac was found. Or maybe the sheriff had wired for



him.

“I was on the trail of a man thought to be hiding out down in New Mexico.” Luke didn’t care for the insinuation in Clyde’s words, his tone of voice, or the hush that fell over the other men.

“You been doing this sort of thing very long? You don’t look like no greenhorn.” Clyde kept swiping his towel along the bar long after there was nothing left to wipe up. If what Luke said was true, neither Deacon nor the sheriff would have known where he was, so they couldn’t have wired for him. As a general rule, Clyde didn’t believe in coincidences.

“I’ve made a lifetime out of it.” At thirty, he knew more about the business of bounty hunting than most men would ever know about it. It wasn’t an easy life. There was nothing about the job that made a man easy in his mind, that much was for sure. Knowing the heart of the story was on its way, Luke kept his answers short, not wanting to distract the

barkeep from his tale.

“Well, you know, old Isaac was a pretty simple man—a farmer his whole life. He weren’t no violent person, so I’d reckon someone with your particular skills might find it real easy to track him down and bring him in. He was okay until the darkness fell over him. You know how that is. I’m sure you’ve seen your share of dark times, given your profession and all.” Clyde flipped the towel to his shoulder and waited for Luke’s response.

A thousand dollars was a reward for a serious criminal, not a farmer who just happened to be having a bad day. And Luke knew well the darkness that could befall a man after the death of a loved one, especially after an unexpected death. It was the darkness that enveloped his soul and left him with nothing but despair. Some men never recovered from it. Others thought they had only to find that it had scarred them for life, forever skewing their view of the world and the people in it.

Yes, Luke understood the darkness.

He ordered another shot.

A few of the men had their say about Isaac Thomas, accused murderer. Letting them talk, Luke listened carefully to the details of their stories. By all accounts, Isaac had been a simple man, not given to violence, and he never even carried a pistol. He was merely trying to carve out a good life for the wife and daughter he loved so much. They were not just the center of his world—they *were* his world.

To Luke, it sounded as if Isaac had moved to Haven Ridge with big dreams filling his head—just like hundreds of other people who moved west in hopes of freedom, happiness, and riches. The sad truth was that a lot of them, most he would guess, never found any of that. The West was hard at its best and downright cruel and devastating at its worst.

“And they’re sure Isaac killed that man in cold blood?” Something didn’t add up about

the story.

Clyde stepped in. “I was here, Luke. I saw it with my own eyes. Isaac shot Samuel dead with his own gun. Took it right off him and pulled the trigger. I told you it happened right there.” He pointed to the dark stain on the floor.

“So, this simple farmer who had been such a decent person got drunk and took Samuel’s gun right out of his holster and killed him with it?” Luke shook his head. It was hard to imagine without some underlying conflict. “Did Isaac have a reason to want Samuel dead?”

Clyde shook his head. “They squabbled that night. I figure Isaac got so sozzled on liquor that he just struck out like a snake and Samuel happened to be there.”

Luke considered this for a minute and then finished his beer. Everyone at the bar stared at him as if awaiting his final verdict. He didn’t

have one. He didn't know anyone involved, didn't know the circumstances of the shooting, and he refused to pass judgment on any man. That wasn't his job. He brought men in so justice could be served not to pass it himself. On a few occasions, he had to shoot a criminal as he tried to detain him, but he didn't make a practice of it.

With a big bounty posting around, it wouldn't be long before other bounty hunters were flocking to Haven Ridge. But he didn't want to do it just for the money. If he chose to search for Isaac Thomas, he would do it because it was the right thing to do to keep people safe.

Pushing his hat back, he said, "Well, that is quite a story. A sad one, at that." He didn't believe Isaac Thomas was a cold-blooded murderer. If he decided to take up the search for him, it might be to keep the accused safe from unscrupulous bounty hunters who would do it for the reward. It was high time to get out of The Saloon. He'd think about the bounty and the man a bit more before making any decision.





# Chapter Six

The next morning, after much thought, sleep, and a good breakfast, Luke headed to the sheriff's office. He walked inside and the sheriff looked up from his papers. "Morning, Sheriff. My name's Luke Houston. I'm a bounty hunter who just happened to come into town yesterday when it seems you had yourself a run of bad luck with a certain prisoner. I hear there's a thousand-dollar reward for Isaac Thomas." He stood there as the sheriff eyed him coolly, looking him up and down. He was used to it. Most lawmen didn't like bounty hunters and most were less than cooperative. *It just comes with the territory for a bounty hunter*, he thought.

"Luke Houston, you say." It wasn't a question. Harvey knew what he'd called himself. He just didn't like the man. He didn't like the fact that he had shown up so quick to jump on that reward money.

"Yes, sir." Luke gave the man a tight smile



and nodded. "Have any ideas about which direction he might be headed?"

"The accused?" Harvey refused to give him any information that might help. Blood-thirsty, money-hungry bounty hunters were the last people he wanted to find Isaac.

"Yes, sir. That would be exactly who I'm talking about. Isaac Thomas. Do you have any idea which direction he might have headed? I might be able to pick up his trail while it's still fresh." Luke took his hat off and sat even though the sheriff had not offered for him to do so.

Harvey sat back in his seat and acted as if he were considering the question. He rubbed his chin and looked out the window and then back to Luke. The man had a hard look about him. He'd lived hard and it showed in the set of his shoulders, the withdrawn expression, and especially the hard set of his eyes. Harvey had seen it before.

Although Luke was not what Harvey

would consider *young*, he pegged his age to be between twenty-nine and thirty-five, and he was still a sight younger than the sheriff. He had to wonder what got Luke into being a bounty hunter in the first place. And as far as trust, he made it a rule to never completely trust a bounty hunter, no matter how well he knew them.

Finally, he smiled at Luke and held his hands out, shrugging. "Not a clue. Sorry. If I had any idea of his whereabouts, I would have already taken after him."

"All right. That's fair enough. What about his family? Does he have any around here?" Luke glanced at the view out the window and then back to Harvey.

Harvey stood and walked to the door. Opening it, he leaned against the frame, looking over the street. If he outright lied to Luke Houston, the *bounty hunter*, Deacon would surely find out about it when the man questioned others in town. He would tell them that the sheriff had told him there was no

family here. Deacon, with his cunning mind, would realize that Harvey was in on the escape or at the very least, surmise that Harvey was withholding valuable information.

Luke took the opportunity to eyeball the missing plank boards at the bottom of the back wall in the holding cell. Isaac had to have help to get those loose. There were no marks inside the cell indicating that he pried them from in there and the cot and small table were in their places, nothing was disturbed.

Except Luke's mind. No one had mentioned that he had help escaping. The man was a drunk and the community members seemed to have made a rule of avoiding him for the last several months. *So, with no family, except the one daughter, who cared enough about Isaac to bust him out?* Luke let his mind wander over the subject a bit longer. He thought about the daughter. *What kind of brazen, courageous woman could plan an escape and then carry through with it on her own?*

Luke briefly thought of his mother. He did

not think even she could have done something so bold; at least not without help.

“Well, sheriff? Does he have family here or not?” Luke stood and put his hat back on, growing impatient.

Reluctantly, Harvey turned to face him. “Only a daughter. His wife died about a year ago.”

Luke heard the strain in the sheriff’s voice, noted the way his brows pulled together, and the stress lines around his eyes. The sheriff did not want to give out the sliver of information but had done so after careful consideration. He was a man stalling for time to think.

“That’s a tragedy. His daughter, how would I find her?” Luke stepped closer and the sheriff moved to the porch, hands on hips, staring off into the distance.

Harvey pointed him in the direction of the Thomas house without giving real directions.

It was more a wave of his hand in a general direction. Luke was smart enough to know there must be a path leading to the house, though, and his job was finding things; he was certain he could find the trail. After all, the Thomas family had to come to town on a regular basis for supplies, meaning the trail would be well-worn and wide enough for a wagon.

“I wouldn’t expect a warm welcome from her if I were you. You’re not the only bounty hunter who’s gonna be knocking on her door in the days to come, and she’s likely to run you off. But, hey,” Harvey tipped his hat in the direction of the Thomas homestead and grinned. “Good luck making progress there.”

Luke took a deep breath and looked into the distance. “Thank you. Uh, I didn’t catch your name.”

“That’s because I didn’t throw it.” Harvey stared coldly at him, the lines in his face deepening.

“All right.” Luke nodded. “What’s your name, Sheriff?” He grinned, hoping it hid the extensive agitation he was feeling.

“Sheriff Roach. Sheriff Harvey Roach.” That same cold expression remained on his face, his dark eyes flaring with dislike and distrust.

Luke stuck out his hand and the good Sheriff Harvey Roach merely glanced at it and crossed his arms, a fake grin stretching his face. Pulling back his hand, Luke turned without another word and mounted up. The sheriff was a hard man, but Luke supposed that came with the territory for a sheriff in a small town.

As he rode toward the Thomas homestead, Luke went over everything he’d learned so far. Samuel Preston, a local rancher and leading community member of Haven Ridge, was dead. The man wanted for shooting him during a drunken barroom brawl was missing after being sprung from jail—he was positive Isaac had help getting out. Clyde, the barkeep,

witnessed the shooting and swore it was Isaac who pulled the trigger. That would be an open-and-shut case if it went to trial. Isaac Thomas would hang for sure.

Again, his mind went back to who the accomplice could have been. The only logical answer to Luke was the daughter, Millie Thomas. And again, he wondered at the strength and determination of a lone female in the night, breaking her drunken father out of jail. There had been no mention, not even a hint in town that she had ever been in trouble with the law before, so she wasn't someone accustomed to living like a bandit. She wasn't a hardened criminal. She was a young woman who had tragically lost her mother a year ago.

*She's struggling to overcome that loss and keep from losing her father, too! Of course, she would do something so bold by herself—she didn't want her father to hang. Still, he couldn't reason how she would have known when the sheriff would be absent from the jail or how she had reasoned it out to pry those boards loose, and with what tool?*

As he got closer to the Thomas homestead, Luke thought something was off about the whole situation. Why was the bounty set so quickly? And why was it such a large amount? And Sheriff Harvey Roach's evasiveness, what was that all about?

His gut told him the sheriff's cageyness was a sure sign the man was not telling him everything he knew and that no matter how many times Luke questioned him, the sheriff would not give him the information. If Luke had learned anything over the years, it was that he should always go with his gut.

A rough-wood cabin came into view. It wasn't tiny; he could see that it had been built with a family in mind. The craftsmanship had been good and the place looked sturdy. The large porch had surely been built at a woman's request. The rocking chairs and little rough-wood tables looked homely and he could imagine many evenings had been passed with the Thomas family sitting in those chairs watching the sunset.



He slowed his horse to a walk and scanned the land. Barn, shed, outhouse, garden cabin, larger fields surrounding the property that butted against mountains farther out. No sign of other people being present.

He rode to the front of the house and a woman stepped out of the house. She held a rifle at her side. The steely edge in her eyes seemed out of place on such a beautiful, heart-shaped face. Her eyebrows drew down in a scowl and her mouth pursed tightly as she glared at him. Her light brown hair fell below her shoulders in waves. But her unflinching defiance struck his heart. He recognized that look in her eyes—he saw it every time he looked in a mirror. Millie Thomas had definitely known her share of troubles and had likely had a visit from the darkness at some point. The steel in her eyes was the scar of that terrible darkness.

He raised his hand in greeting, reminding himself that this was not a woman to be trifled with.

“Hello, Miss Thomas. I’m just looking for your father. Would you happen to know his whereabouts?”

In answer, her finger curled around the trigger and she stiffened, bringing the rifle butt closer to her slender shoulder. He knew his window of opportunity was closing. Within seconds, he would have a rifle pointed at his chest. Needing to gain her ear, Luke started again.

“I’ve spoken to Sheriff Roach. I just left there. I have to admit that something about this situation don’t seem right to me. Something’s off about the shooting incident.” Luke watched as the finger around the trigger remained where it was, and the rifle’s ascent toward her shoulder halted. “I might be able to help you and your father, Miss Thomas. That is if you would be so inclined as to let me speak with you for a minute. You know, *without* the rifle.” He grinned and pointed toward the gun she held.

They stared at each other for several

seconds. The swell of her breasts against the blue material of her dress was impossible to miss. Luke forced himself not to let his eyes drop. Even with several feet separating them, she might catch the movement and be insulted. He had been on the trail for weeks though and she was by far the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—even if she was pointing a gun at him.

She did not seem to be considering his offer of help at all. More importantly, the way her finger moved around that trigger, the rifle now rested against her shoulder, seemed to say that she was considering shooting him out of the saddle more than anything.

It was obvious, to him at least, that they were getting nowhere, and they were getting there in record time.

The smell of freshly picked vegetables moved to him in the slow-moving, warm air. It hung around him and his belly rumbled. The memory of picking fresh vegetables with his mother sprang to mind unbidden. He could see

her clearly in his mind's eye; standing tall among the squash and bean vines, beautiful, brown hair blowing out from the bright red ribbon she always wore, a smile on her face as little Luke held up a yellow bent squash. He had been thrilled at finding the largest one among the vines. *That's the prettiest and the biggest squash I've ever seen! What a prize.* His mother's voice was angelic in his memory.

Luke shuddered and forced away the memory. *Not the time for reminiscing,* he thought and trained his attention on Millie and her gun again. Luke blew out a deep breath as Millie stared blankly at him. He could not get a read on her. That was unusual *and* frustrating. He had relied on his uncanny ability to instantly read people all his life. Until now. Not that he minded staring at such a beautiful woman, but the fact that she was staring back at him with a loaded rifle was bad.

Millie watched as the hard set of the bounty hunter's face and eyes faded to a soft, childlike expression and he seemed to go somewhere else for a moment. She wondered

where he had gone in his memory that warranted such a change in his demeanor.

In that instant when his expression softened, she saw a handsome man. A man of integrity and caring. And then it was gone. His face was guarded again by the harder expression and she was left wondering if she had seen the other side of him or if she had only imagined it.

Millie stared hard at the man on the horse. He was a bounty hunter looking for her father. It surprised her at how fast the word of the reward had spread. It had only been posted the day before. And, why would a bounty hunter offer to help her and her father?

*Because he thinks he can get on my good side and I'll lead him to Papa, she thought, tightening her trigger finger. Does he really believe I'll just naively trust him? Spill the beans so he can get his grubby paws on that reward money? Bounty hunters are no better a breed than those hired guns who do all of Deacon's dirty work, she thought. Anger pulsed through*

her and she raised the rifle. *He's probably the first of many who'll be making their rounds here in the next few days*, she thought.

The best she could do was give them nothing. Not a shred of information. And that's just what she would give this first bounty hunter. Reluctantly, Millie lowered the rifle again, keeping her finger on the trigger as she brought it from her shoulder to her side, still pointing in his direction.

Glaring defiantly at him one last time, she loosened her grip and let the barrel angle toward the porch boards as she turned and went back inside. Stepping into the kitchen, she watched the man out the window but remained far enough away so he could not see her. She was watching for that change in expression again.

Luke's heart skipped a beat when Millie raised the rifle and pointed it straight at him. He had never drawn a gun on a woman before and he wouldn't start now. But he didn't fancy getting shot either. Her eyes softened a bit and

she lowered the gun. Was she considering his offer of help?

Then, after shooting him her most aggressively defiant look yet, she turned and disappeared into the house again, leaving him sitting in the dusty road with nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Well, that’s just great,” Luke mumbled under his breath. He turned Chester to face the trail for town again, but he waited. *Maybe she will return with something, some scrap of information*, he thought.





# Chapter Seven

It was simple enough to find Clyde McCormick. He was at The Saloon behind the bar where he spent the bigger part of his time. Harvey had already heard the man's statement about the fight and Samuel's death, but he had to get it on paper so it would be legal.

As he neared The Saloon, Harvey saw several horses at the post. None of them belonged to Deacon's men. That was good. He wanted to interview Clyde alone and not while he could possibly be influenced by Carson or Wade.

Someone was banging away at the old piano inside and there was a chorus of off-key singers. The crowd was already getting boisterous and sunset was still several hours away. Harvey sighed. *I hope it's not going to be one of those nights. Not tonight, anyway.*

Stepping through the doors, Harvey was

greeted by one of the saloon girls stumbling into him and spilling beer down his shirt. He caught her before she fell to the floor. Giggling, she stood grasping a handful of his vest in one hand and the half-glass of beer in the other. She was willowy, tall, and spoke with a German accent. Her cornsilk yellow hair was in need of brushing and her makeup was badly smudged already.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Sheriff,” she crooned in his face. He flinched from the sour smell of cigarette smoke and beer on her breath.

He helped her gain her balance and pried his vest from her hand. “It’s all right, Ivy.” He tried to step around her, but she moved to block him, her eyes roaming his body.

“You wouldn’t take a lady upstairs and get her away from all these mongrels for a while, would you?” She puckered and leaned drunkenly toward him.

“Ivy, if there was a lady here, I would gladly remove her from this pit of mongrels,

but I don't see one. Now, go about your business, so I can go about mine." He moved to the side again.

Ivy pouted her lips out at him and made a rude gesture with her hand. "Think you're too good for Ivy? Ivy is far too good for you," she bellowed in a thick accent as she turned away, flipping her long and tangled hair with a haughty air.

*Harvey shook his head. In another life, she would have made a beautiful aristocrat, he thought.* Continuing to the bar, he waited impatiently for Clyde to come over to him. The man seemed to take an inordinately long amount of time with his two other customers at the bar. Harvey caught a few of the stealthy glances thrown at him by Clyde. The man seemed to be avoiding him on purpose.

Finally, he wandered down the bar and asked, "Hey, Sheriff. What can I get for you?" He grinned and it looked genuine enough except for the slight tremor in his voice.

“I’m not drinking anything today, Clyde. I wanted to talk to you, actually. Alone.” Harvey looked to the back, behind the bar, where the business office was located.

Using the bar towel, Clyde wiped his forehead and face. “Well, I’m real busy here. As you can see, people are already coming in here looking to cool off. Sun’s darn hot today.” He chuckled nervously and looked around at the crowd.

Harvey nodded. “I can see that, Clyde. Looks like things will be heating up soon enough in here, too, if they all keep drinking. I won’t take but five minutes of your time. We can do it here, or you can come with me down to the jail and we can do it there.” Harvey smiled, knowing Clyde wouldn’t dare follow him to the jail and risk his rowdy customers stealing money and drinks.

His good-ole-boy expression broke instantly and was replaced by irritation. Flinging the bar towel down, he motioned. “Fine. Come on back. But I ain’t got all day,

just remember that.”

Stepping through the raised section of the bar, Harvey said, “I’ll keep it in mind.”

In the tiny office, Clyde hooked his foot around a chair leg and drew it out from between the desk and wall. He took the seat on the business side of the desk. “What do you need from me that can’t wait until the bar’s not so busy?” It was a colder, more distant, and less friendly side of Clyde that Harvey had never seen before.

He pulled out the paper and a pencil. Purposefully slow, he put them on the desk and made ready to write. “Well, Clyde, I need your version of what happened in here the other night.” He licked the lead of the pencil and poised it over the paper.

“I already told you what happened, Sheriff. I told you when you came in that night.” Clyde fidgeted in his seat and looked to the door and back at Harvey.

“No, Clyde. You told me nothing. You just said that it happened like Carson said. He’s the one who told me the story first.” He watched Clyde’s face go through several changes before the man spoke again.

“Well, that is how it happened, just like he said it did. And didn’t Jacob Conley tell you the same thing?”

“He did, but you never told me your version. I need to hear it from you so I can put it on paper and it’s legal. You were a witness, tell me in your own words what happened.” He put the pencil over the paper again.

“For pity’s sake. You said five minutes.” Clyde huffed out a sigh of frustration and leaned his elbows on the desk. “You ready? I’m not telling this twice tonight. I still got a business to run out there.”

“Oh, I’m ready; you just start anytime. I’ll stop you if I need you to repeat something.”

Harvey wrote fast, taking down Clyde's version word for word. He stopped him at several key places to have him repeat it so he could watch his expressions and body language, not particularly because he had missed a word or two.

Having to repeat parts of his story made Clyde mad. He knew full well that the sheriff was only trying to trip him up. It wouldn't work. He stuck to the original version of events, giving exactly the same story as Carson, minus the reenactments. It was far too hot in the windowless room to be throwing fake punches and whatnot.

Five minutes turned into ten and then fifteen. With every passing minute, Clyde could imagine losing more money. If he wasn't out there at the bar, some of his less that reputable patrons might be inclined to take advantage.

After nearly thirty minutes, the interview was done and the sheriff sat back, reading over the paper. At the end, Harvey had filled

the sheet of paper on one side. He started reading over it and Clyde stood up abruptly. "I ain't got time to sit idle while you read that over and over. I'll be out here if you need me. I'm sure you can find your own way out when you're done." Clyde arched sweat from his brow and exited the room, leaving the door open.

Harvey folded the paper. He didn't need anything else from Clyde. The man was obviously just retelling Carson's story. But as long as he stuck to that same version, there was nothing Harvey could do.

Taking a long look around the office, he saw nothing that helped his situation one way or the other. He left, shutting the door and stepping through the raised section of bar. He held up a hand in a slight wave to Clyde as he left. Clyde responded with a curt nod in his direction.

Jacob Conley was nowhere in town. That meant he was probably at home. Harvey rode to the Conley homestead, hoping that he could



get something out of Samuel's best friend about what really went on at The Saloon. His gut still told him that something was off about the situation and that one, or all, of the witnesses were hiding something.

Jacob was in his big barn, replacing boards in his wagon. He looked up as Harvey rode into the barnyard and then into the barn. The smell of cow dung, sickly-sweet, tinged the air. The far-away aroma of a hearty supper being cooked wafted to him every now and then. Jacob's wife and daughter, no doubt, were preparing the evening meal.

"Hello, Jacob." Harvey dismounted and stuck out his hand in greeting.

Jacob looked warily at it and then to his two hired hands standing near the door. He nodded at them. "You fellas go on and take a break then go to the top field and pick some corn for Mrs. Conley to add to supper. Enough for everybody, now, you hear?"

The two men nodded and answered, "Yes,

sir.” Then they walked off quickly.

Harvey pulled his hand back and took out the paper and his pencil again.

Jacob turned back to him. “What can I do for you, Sheriff Roach?” He wiped his hands on his trousers and propped his butt on a sawhorse.

“I’m sorry to bother you while you’re working, but I need your version of the events that took place at The Saloon the other night.” He lifted his paper and pencil. “I need to get it on paper, so it’s legal.”

Shaking his head, Jacob looked out the door toward his house and armed sweat from his brow. His shaggy hair was matted to his head with sweat and his shirt was wet with it. Jacob was a hardworking man doing all he could to support his family and give them a good life. Sun-up to sundown, those were his usual working hours and on Sundays, his wife had to guilt him into resting. It wasn’t proper to work on Sundays, she always told him.

Harvey had heard her say it more than once as they were leaving Sunday worship.

“I told you what happened, Sheriff.” Jacob kept staring out the barn door toward his house.

“I know and I also know that you and Samuel were friends. I’m sorry, but I have to hear it in your own words so I can write it down. I can’t do that from memory, Jacob.”

Jacob nodded and looked down at the dirt and hay in front of his boots. “All right. If you say so.”

“I’m sorry, Jacob, but I do.”

Harvey listened to his detailed story and noted that there were more details this time so that it was nearly identical to Clyde’s story. Jacob never made eye contact and even went so far as to measure a few boards as he talked. When Harvey had him repeat the same parts as he had made Clyde repeat, they remained

unchanged as did his body language.

Not wishing to take up any more of Jacob's time and not wanting to keep the wound open, Harvey folded his paper and stuffed it into the saddlebag this time. It would likely be a long ride all the way out to Deacon's place to find Carson, and he didn't want to sweat on the paper or writing on it would be impossible.

"Thank you, Jacob." He stuck out his hand again.

After a moment's hesitation, Jacob shook it. "Yep. Just see that you get the no-good heathen that shot Samuel."

That was an odd thing for Jacob to say after giving his sworn statement that it had, indeed, been Isaac who had done the shooting. "That, according to all accounts including yours, would be Isaac Thomas. Right?"

He held Harvey's gaze for a few heartbeats

and then nodded. "I reckon so, Sheriff. That's what I said, ain't it?" He turned back to his work before Harvey could reply.

Mounting up, Harvey said, "It's also what Carson and Clyde said. So, I reckon as soon as the bounty hunters find him, Isaac will hang." Maybe, if Jacob was lying for whatever reason, that statement would give him something to think about. If he had a bout with his conscience and came away feeling guilty, he might tell Harvey what really happened. He moved out of the barn and stopped. "By the way, I didn't see you in the angry mob."

Jacob stopped working and looked at Harvey. "What angry mob?"

"It's of no consequence. Bye, Jacob." Harvey waved and rode off the Conley homestead back toward town and Deacon's place far beyond.

As he rode toward Deacon's place, Harvey wondered if Luke Houston the bounty hunter

had gotten any information out of Millie or if she had run him off. He grinned to himself.

*She probably greeted him with the rifle,* he thought.

She wouldn't have given him any *useful* information, he was sure of that, but he feared she might have told him to go looking in another direction. Luke seemed to be many things but dumb wasn't one of them. If he searched out a false lead given by the accused's own daughter then he would be smart enough to know she had led him on a wild goose chase which meant she knew something. How else would she be able to lead him *away* from her father?

He would have to deal with that later *if* she had done so. He thought it more likely that she had sent the young bounty hunter on his way without a word. Maybe a warning shot, but no words at all. He chuckled. Millie was strong-willed and feisty. He loved her in his own way. He imagined it was love like the love between an uncle and niece, a father and

daughter or even siblings. He had no children or siblings—his brother had died before he was old enough to remember him, therefore no daughter or niece. So, he had to imagine.

Riding onto Deacon's massive ranch, Harvey scanned the land, quickly adding up the men he saw scattered about. It always unnerved him to ride onto Deacon's property where the guns were hired and morals were absent. But he was the sheriff and it was his duty. He would not show fear.

Carson was sitting on the side porch with Deacon. Not good. It would be difficult to separate the two.

Deacon waved. "Well, howdy, Sheriff Roach. How goes the search? Surely it didn't lead you to my place."

"In a way, it did just that." He couldn't resist needling the man a little. He liked to watch him bristle.

“What on Earth do you mean, *it did just that?* You better mean that you found Isaac and you’ve come to report good news.” Deacon was on his feet, thumbs hooked into belt loops, eyes squinting against the sun at Harvey’s back. Carson was on his feet an instant after Deacon, looking from one to the other.

Harvey dismounted and drew the paper from the saddlebag. He heard the commotion of boots on the porch and held the paper up, wagging it back and forth as he turned slowly. Carson stood squared off to him, hand on pistol, tense. Deacon stood slightly to the left and behind the bigger man.

Chuckling, Harvey raised his eyebrows and jiggled the paper in his outstretched hand again. “I just need to ask Carson, here, a few questions about the incident in The Saloon.” Silently, he added, *If I was going to shoot you, I wouldn’t be reaching for a gun in my saddlebag, I’d use the one on my hip, Deacon.*

Relaxing his stance, Carson tried to play it



off by adjusting his gun belt and then leaning against a baluster. Deacon grunted laughter and sat at the table again. "Well, Carson. Looks like you better answer his questions." Deacon turned up a drink.

The big man nodded. "Ask away, Sheriff."

"I just need your version of the events so I can get them on paper. They're legal that way. No big deal." He walked toward the porch. "Mr. Owens, could we use the other table there?"

"Oh, back to Mr. Owens now that you're not accusing me of being at fault, I see." He motioned toward the other table, grinning like a freshly fed lion, sated for the moment but quite possibly still dangerous.

Harvey nodded Carson toward the table. Again, he got the same story, almost verbatim. All three stories meshed so well that he wondered if they had memorized it the same way stage-actors memorized their lines before putting on a play. It sure seemed that way.

Thanking Carson for his time and Deacon for his hospitality, Harvey left the ranch, glad to be away from it again.

Back at his office, Harvey strode inside, weary from the long day of getting absolutely nowhere in his investigation. He poured himself a cup of old coffee and made a face when he tasted it. Better than nothing, he thought as he sat to go over the testimonies on paper one more time.

*Nearly identical, he thought. If Deacon is involved, Carson's testimony is worthless. The other two testimonies hold more weight in comparison, he thought. And, they match Carson's. Why?*

He stood and paced the length of the small office, looking every now and then to Isaac's escape hole in the cell. Maybe Deacon has already gotten to Clyde and Jacob. In Clyde's case, it wouldn't be surprising to him. *That man is out to make money and doesn't much care who's paying him or for what. But Jacob?*

He paced some more. It didn't make sense that Jacob could be bought by Deacon's money. Jacob was a good, upstanding member of the community and one of the most honest and hardworking of them all. The only one who worked harder had been Samuel Preston and he was dead.

*Deacon must have something else to hold over Jacob's head. It's the only explanation,* Harvey thought as he stared out the window toward the Thomas homestead.

He had one more person to interview and that was Mary Preston, Samuel's widow. Though he itched to talk to her, he would hold off for a few days. The poor woman was grieving. He would give her time to mourn before he interviewed her. She might hold the key to unraveling the whole nasty mess and not even know it. In his experience, it happened that way often.



# Chapter Eight

Instead of riding away from the Thomas homestead, Luke headed for the barn. He wanted a quick look around. With Millie surely watching, he would only have a minute at the most before she shooed him off her property with that rifle. *I've not made it this far in life without pushing my luck every now and then*, he thought and rode Chester into the barn. He dismounted and walked into the room where tools were neatly stacked and hung around. In the center of the room lay a tool he had never seen before with three feet of its handle sawn off and lying in the dirt. He picked up the tool and looked it over quickly. *It would have been perfect for a woman prying boards loose... like the ones at the jail*, he thought.

Tossing the tool back to the dirt, he smiled. *Millie was a smart woman to figure out which tool would work best with her strength*, he thought. He wondered if he would have figured it out if he were in the same position. He doubted it. Shaking his head, he mounted

up and rode swiftly off the property toward town. He wanted to get on Isaac's trail but thought it wise to speak with the sheriff again first. Maybe convince him that they wanted the same thing—justice for Isaac Thomas.

It would be risky to lay all his cards on the table with the man. For all he knew, Sheriff Harvey Roach was just another lowlife, dirty lawman doing the bidding of his even dirtier boss. From the short conversation with the sheriff, though, Luke thought the man was honest and trustworthy. At least that's what his gut told him—and it was usually right. So far, it had never led him wrong.

He had worked with his fair share of lawmen who were happy to get all the help they could, from Luke or any other source that offered. Sometimes that was good; sometimes it was not. He had also worked for lawmen who were too scared to do their job which led to the escape in the first place and which led to Luke hunting down extremely dangerous men who often had killed innocent people while on the run.

Sheriff Roach didn't seem frightened of anything or anyone. He had enough backbone to stand up to the devil himself, Luke believed. So, cowardice had not played into the escape situation at all. *But the sheriff might have been persuaded to look the other way while Isaac escaped if he truly believed the man was innocent and harmless to others.*

Luke thought that was very possible. A man like Sheriff Roach had a certain moral code that he lived by and wouldn't let that moral code be broken for anything—the innocent were to be protected and the guilty were to be disciplined, all according to the law.

As he rode, he took in the beauty of the midpoint between Haven Ridge and the Thomas homestead. He could easily imagine his mother taking a picnic with him and his father in one of the fields of wildflowers and yarrow. A copse of trees pulled his attention and a tugging feeling in his gut told him to ride over there, stand in the shade of those trees for a moment. He didn't know why, but he followed his gut and rode to the little stand

of trees.

The first thing he noticed was that the flowers had been trampled in a skinny path that led a zig-zag line to the trail then he noticed that there were actually three lines of tramped-down flowers. Two led to different points on the trail and one led in the opposite direction. It led to the west.

Under the trees, he dismounted to get a closer look. A large horse had been tethered to a small tree. It had grazed on the nearby grass and left hoofmarks all over the ground under the trees. *As if someone had been hiding here...* The thought came to him from the ether.

All at once, he understood. Millie had loaded a horse and hid it there for her father and then, after breaking him out, she had brought him there and he had ridden away to the west. It was a long shot and he had absolutely no evidence to support the thought, but it was there and it made sense to him. It's what he would have done in a similar situation.



He rode harder toward town, toward the sheriff's office.

As he strode into the jail station for the second time, Luke was greeted with silence from Sheriff Roach. The man was going out of his way to be rude it seemed. Nonplussed, Luke took off his hat and dusted it against the leg of his riding chaps.

"So, Sheriff, how goes the investigation? Any leads? Anything at all new?" He didn't smile. There was no need. The sheriff didn't like him much, trusted him even less, and a smile from Luke wouldn't tip the table in either direction enough to matter.

Harvey gave him a disdainful look as if he thought Luke might be up to no good, or he was green. "How'd your little inquiry session with Miss Thomas work out? Any new leads?" Harvey kept his expression blank although Luke could see he wanted to grin.

Luke blew out a sigh and shook his head. “That didn’t go as planned, I can tell you that. She’s not one to be trifled with. I think she would prefer to do her talking with that rifle.” He chuckled unable to help himself as he thought of the feisty and strong young woman with the steely glint in her beautiful eyes.

“Yep. I figured as much. You probably got off lucky. I don’t see any bullet holes.” Harvey kept his sober appearance, but Luke could see the merry glint in his dark eyes. “Why aren’t you taking advantage of your fortuitous head start on all the other bounty hunters that are heading this way probably as we speak?”

Holding his hat in both hands, Luke looked right into Harvey’s eyes. “That’s why I’m here, Sheriff. I want to talk to you about this situation. The way I see it is that Isaac isn’t guilty of shooting anybody. I can’t rightly explain it, I just *feel* it. And I believe you and I share that same suspicion.”

“And so, what if I do think Isaac’s innocent in all this?” Harvey sat forward in his

seat, suddenly a bit more interested in what the bounty hunter was thinking. “A bounty hunter is just that—a bounty hunter. Someone who gets paid to hunt down, capture, and return outlaws so justice can be served.”

“This isn’t about the money. It never is for me. This is about helping a man who I believe has been set up. If I was in it just for the money, it’d be the easiest thousand dollars I ever earned. Finding Isaac and bringing him in would be simple for me, Sheriff, even you must realize that. Besides, if I was only in it for the money, why would I be wasting my time talking to you?” Luke shifted his weight and put his hat back on. He was glad the sheriff was at least listening to him. He had thought the man might just tell him to get lost.

Harvey knew what Luke meant. Every good lawman knew that *feeling* in his gut, in his chest and the questions that just wouldn’t leave him be. That feeling was usually a hundred percent right. And Luke was right: he did share his suspicion.

Harvey steepled his fingers under his chin and took a moment to weigh everything he had heard. And to gain the measure of Luke Houston the *bounty hunter*. Would he ever be able to think of him in any other terms? Maybe. Luke made sense. If he were in it only for the money, he would have gone out and been on Isaac's trail already. And yes, Harvey did recognize him as a man of skill when he first met him. It was hard not to take note of the way he looked at everything and everyone, the way he measured situations constantly, his stance, and mostly, that look in his eyes—that dead-set determination of a dog on a fresh blood trail, hard to distract and even harder to escape from.

Convinced that Luke was genuine and that he meant no harm to Isaac Thomas, Harvey motioned to the chair opposite the desk. "Have a seat, Luke. Let's talk about this and see what we can come up with. What do you say?" Harvey gave him the first real smile since meeting him.

Luke, returning the smile, nodded and removed his hat again as he took the proffered

seat. "I say let's catch us a bad guy. One that ain't named Isaac Thomas."

Feeling easier in his mind about Luke, the sheriff smiled. It would be a relief to finally have someone he could talk to about the Deacon Owens situation. "Luke, I'm gonna tell you this in the strictest confidence because I believe you are a just man." Harvey waited for the bounty hunter to agree and then he continued. "Deacon Owens owns this town. He's the founder and the mayor. Nothing happens here without his say. You understand that kind of man, I'm sure."

Nodding, Luke agreed. "Yeah, Haven Ridge isn't any different than most of the small towns I've been through. There's always one man who really runs things."

"Yeah, I've seen my share of them, too, before I came here. I thought Haven Ridge was different." He shook his head and leaned forward. "Now, this situation with Isaac Thomas... I don't think old Isaac shot Samuel. Plain as that. My gut tells me he couldn't have

done it; he had no reason to do it.”

“But there were witnesses who said he did it. Clyde—”

“Is on Deacon’s payroll,” Harvey interrupted. “And so is Wade, the other witness.” Harvey scratched at his chin absently. “Jacob is the only one I don’t understand. He was Samuel’s best friend. He was there. He told the same story, but he was nervous, all twitchy, and couldn’t make eye contact when I talked to him that night. Wasn’t much different when I went to his house, either. Except he gave more details; those details seemed memorized. And they made his story almost an exact copy of the other two.”

“What could make a best friend lie about something like that?” Luke peered out the window. A few women walked down the side of the street carrying their baskets of goods, their children in-tow behind them. “I mean, wouldn’t a friend want the right person to hang for the murder?”

Harvey nodded. "That's what I can't figure. But my gut tells me Deacon is behind this. Somehow, he's the cause. My theory is that Deacon wanted Samuel dead, he told his boys to kill him but make sure the murder couldn't be laid on his doorstep. Carson followed Samuel to The Saloon and saw that Isaac would make a perfect scapegoat."

"Clyde told me that Isaac's drunken displays were affecting his business, too, so there'd be no complaining from him either. And, no one else would protest, would they?" Luke turned his attention back to the sheriff.

"Nope. And Deacon's boys would never say a word about it." He eyed Luke to make sure he was paying attention. "They know better. Deacon never gets his hands dirty, but trust me when I say that he is not beyond killing one of his hired guns and making the body disappear out there on one of those mountains, or the open ranges."

Before he was appointed sheriff of Haven

Ridge, Harvey had suspected Deacon of threatening some of the other homesteaders to get his hands on their property. None of them would give him a straight story at the time and they had all moved out of Colorado soon afterward. It was during that time that one of Deacon's men took a shine to one of the homesteaders' daughter, and he stood up to Deacon, demanding that he leave the family alone.

That hired gun disappeared and was never seen again. Harvey always thought a hunter or a trapper would stumble over the bones of that hired gun someday.

"If Clyde's on his payroll just like Wade, maybe Jacob is too and you just don't know it." Luke shifted in his seat.

"No, I don't think so." Harvey considered it a moment longer and shook his head. "No. I'm sure that Jacob would never work for Deacon. Trust me on that one. I have my reasons to say so. One is that Jacob can't stand Deacon on a personal level. Secondly, he



thinks Deacon is trying to make working slaves of all the homesteaders. On that, he's not completely wrong; I see it happening, too."

"Then, we have to figure out why he would lie about the murder." Luke nodded decisively.

Again, Harvey shook his head. "Not exactly. I think that first, we need to find out why Deacon Owens wanted Samuel dead in the first place. Pinning a murder on the mayor isn't going to be easy."

Grinning, Luke stood. "Nothing in life worth doing is ever easy, is it, Sheriff?"

Deciding that he did, indeed, like Luke Houston, the bounty hunter, Harvey chuckled and stood. "No, son, I guess you're right." He shook his hand. "Now, we need to move quickly. The longer we delay, the greater the chances are that another bounty hunter, one not so inclined to see him safely back here, will find Isaac."

“Nope. And with a thousand-dollar bounty posting all around the place, it won’t be long before every bounty hunter in the territory ends up here. They’ll swarm this place like locusts.” Luke walked to the door with the sheriff. “I’m not interested in that bounty, just so you know. I don’t want it.”

“That’s noble of you.” Harvey waited for Luke to retract the statement. If he was just in it for the bounty, he would. The young man stood quietly, looking at the sheriff levelly. *He’s decisive, that’s good. I like that. A man who knows his mind and once it’s made up, it’s done.*

Harvey continued once the silence had stretched out too long. “At least if *you* find him and bring him in, we’ll have a better chance of keeping him alive until the circuit judge comes back this way.” Harvey started to open the door and then paused. Something bothered him about the decision. “Wait. We can’t bring him in too soon. If we bring him in before we have the evidence to link Deacon to the murder... Well, Isaac won’t get a fair trial. Do you see what I mean?”

“Yeah. We’ll have to work together on this, Sheriff. If we don’t, an innocent man could die whether we bring him in safe or if someone else brings him in.” Luke scuffed his boot against the floor restlessly.

“We can’t let on that we’re working together, though. That could cause a whole heap of trouble if it got back to Deacon.” Harvey thought Luke would keep their collaboration secret. If he didn’t, it would mean trouble for him, too. *And possibly for Millie, too.*

“No, I guess we don’t need to let anyone know about it, except Miss Thomas. I’ll have to tell her. She don’t trust me and I’ll need her to know that me and you are working together. Else she won’t be inclined to even listen to me.”

“Yeah. She’s right not to trust men, seeing as how she’s out there all alone most of the time.” He gave Luke a stern look. “Especially not a bounty hunter on the trail of her father.

You have your work cut out for you with Miss Thomas.” Harvey grinned.

“I know. I’ll be as charming and convincing as I can be. Try not to upset her any.”

“She trusts me. I’ve helped her and her father a lot over the last year. Keeping him out of as much trouble as possible. So, you go tell her that you’ve talked to me. I wouldn’t suggest giving her all the details but give her enough so that she believes you’re on my side in this thing and maybe she won’t run you off again.” Harvey clapped him on the shoulder.

Laughing, Luke nodded. “I’ll do that.”

“I can send word to the circuit judge. I’ll ask him how soon he can get here for a trial. I’ll tell him it is urgent. Maybe he’ll send word back today if we’re lucky.” Harvey wasn’t sure in which town the judge could be found. He had a general schedule of when he would be in the area again, but nothing was for sure when it came to trials and hangings. Mostly, it

depended on how many people were set to go to trial in each town upon his visits.

After a moment of silence between them, Luke cleared his throat. “Okay. Millie knows where her father is hiding. I need to get her to trust me enough to tell me. I think you should go talk to Jacob again, try to get the truth out of him.”

“That sounds like a good idea. But you understand that Millie is going to think you’re just another bounty hunter out to get that reward money, right? She’s going to be a hard sell. All she has left is her father. I’m sure she’ll not give you his whereabouts unless you can convince her that you’re not about that money—you’re about proving his innocence.” He paused, letting Luke absorb the information and then continued, “We need to talk to Mary Preston, too. She’s Samuel’s widow.” Harvey didn’t have the heart to disturb Mary while she was likely to be still mourning. “We’ll give her some more time before we talk to her.” He looked down, saddened by what the poor woman would go through without her husband. He opened the

door and they stepped out.

“I’ll head over to the Thomas homestead right now and try to talk to Millie.” Luke tipped his hat and set off.

Watching Luke ride away, Harvey hoped he had not made a mistake by telling Luke all that he suspected. A mistake like that could cost him his life.



# Chapter Nine

As he rode to the Thomas homestead again, Luke let his mind conjure up images of Millie standing on her porch, her rifle pointed at him, and with that steely glint in her eye. Her lovely face was set and grim as she bravely confronted him. He wondered if she was ever afraid out there all alone. Her homestead was secluded. The fields and mountains isolated her. He decided that she probably was not afraid of much. Not such a strong-willed woman, a beautiful woman with a strength hidden inside that most people wouldn't recognize because of her outward beauty and softness.

Convincing her would be difficult, almost impossible, he knew. But it was a challenge he was ready to take. She hadn't uttered a single word when he last visited. Perhaps it would be different this time. He wanted to hear her voice.

At the edge of the property, he paused to



think about how best to start a conversation with a woman who was so set against listening to him. He had dealt with similar situations before. None of those women had been as determined as Millie had seemed. The sheriff had confirmed that she was tough, and Luke reckoned she had to be. Otherwise, she couldn't survive the harshness of the Colorado territory.

Walking Chester toward the house, a scream, high, panicked, and shrill broke through the calm air. For a moment, Luke froze. He couldn't tell whether the scream was an animal or a person, but his heart thumped a little faster and a little harder as he listened for it again. Chester stopped and pawed the ground nervously. Luke listened, straining to hear any sound.

The scream came again. It was Millie. He was sure of it.

Whistling, he kicked Chester into action. The horse bolted forward, his long and powerful strides getting Luke to the house

quickly. In the side yard, under the big oak, three men had hold of Millie. She screamed again and Luke grabbed his rifle. They were jerking her around and laughing. She kicked one and he stumbled back, falling to the ground. She rammed her head back into the face of the man with his arm around her neck and kicked at the other.

Luke fired his rifle into the air. A warning shot to get their attention. No one was going to manhandle a woman in his presence. If they wanted a fight, they could fight with him. The three men halted as the shot rang out. They turned toward him in unison, their hands on the butts of their holstered pistols, faces contorted in rage.

He recognized them as Deacon's men. Wade stood at the back, looking toward the dirt. Luke figured he was trying not to be recognized. The other two he didn't know, but if Wade was with them, they were definitely Deacon's men.

Luke leveled his rifle at them and raised

his eyebrows. They took their hands away from their guns and Luke nodded. Millie stumbled toward the house. "You boys looking for a fair fight today?" Luke kept his finger on the trigger and the rifle pointed at them. Wade moved back another two steps, keeping his head down, and watching Luke from upturned eyes.

They exchanged confused looks and the one with the beard and big belly shrugged and then shook his head at Luke, the other two glanced toward their horses. For a man who didn't get his hands dirty, Deacon had pushed his luck sending the three men to Millie's house knowing she was alone.

*Maybe that's why he did it. He didn't have any idea that anyone else would be showing up out here today. Lowlife!* Sliding from his saddle, Luke held the rifle with one hand and pushed his hat back with the other. Taking two long strides in their direction, he shook his head. "If you are, I'm right here." Not for the first time in his life, Luke hoped they would take him up on the offer of a fight.

The one who had shaken his head spoke, his voice carrying the strain of fear. "Mister, we ain't got no quarrel with you."

"That's good to know." Luke raised his rifle, so it rode comfortably against his side. "But if I ever see you on this property again, we're gonna have a quarrel. If I even hear about you bothering Miss Thomas again, we're gonna have more than a quarrel. You understand?"

"Yessir." The man nearly yelled as he broke and ran for his horse. Wade was the first one on his horse. Then the other man mounted up spurring his horse hard, trying to catch up with Wade. The bearded man mounted up slower and risked giving Luke a hate-filled look before turning his horse in the direction of the others.

Relieved that he hadn't had to shoot anyone, Luke watched until they were out of sight. He put his rifle back on Chester, patted the horse's neck, and turned to the house. Surprisingly, Millie had not run inside once

getting free of the scoundrels who had been roughing her up. She stood by the edge of her porch and once again, Luke saw that steely glint in her eyes as she stared in the direction of the men.

Keeping his voice gentle, he said, "They're gone now, Miss Thomas. I watched until they were out of sight." He moved toward her and she turned her piercing gaze on him. "I don't think you'll be bothered with them again. At least not any time soon." He smiled reassuringly at her. The smile came naturally, and he was glad.

Behind that glint, that strength in Millie, he saw the waver of something softer and it made him feel as if he needed to protect her, protect that softness in her. He had never felt that strange stirring in himself before.

She stared at him silently for what seemed like ages. All the while, that hardness seemed to peel away in steady layers until finally, Millie Thomas stood before him, smiling back. His heart skipped as her face bunched up with

that smile. It was like the sun breaking through storm clouds. With the features of her face softened, he saw how truly gorgeous she was.

The soft arch of her eyebrows, the delicate curve of her neck, her high cheekbones now lightly pinked instead of flushed red as they had been when she first stumbled away from the men—every feature stood out in stark contrast against the severity of her life and her situation.

*How can something so delicate and beautiful, tender and soft survive what she's been forced to deal with? How does she keep it together instead of just breaking under the pressure?* Luke had known strong men, stronger than himself, who had broken under less stress.

Millie had been terrified when Deacon's men had confronted her at the oak tree. They had accused her of breaking her father out of jail and when she didn't answer, they had threatened her. She had dropped her vegetables and made a run for the house and

her rifle, but they had overtaken her so quickly, demanding to know where he was as they jerked her in different directions, put their hands on her roughly in the beginning, and escalating as they had begun to laugh and enjoy their sport with her.

She had been sure that they were going to rape and brutalize her. Her only choice had been to fight back. Even holding them off for ten minutes had proved to her that she would have tired out long before they would have. When Luke rode up and fired his rifle, she had never been so glad to see anyone in her life. If not for him, she would have been...

*Best not to think on it too much,* she thought.

But she did think about it. She couldn't put it out of her mind. Even as they rode away like scared mongrels, she thought about it. Then Luke had spoken to her, snapping her back to reality. He had saved her. Nothing terrible had happened and it was because Luke, whom she had greeted with a rifle

earlier, had shown up and protected her. Her mouth felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton and she had trouble forming words, so she settled on smiling up at Luke, conveying her thanks.

After a moment, she got ahold of her emotions, calmed her breathing and willed her pulse to slow. Then she spoke. "Thank you, Mr. Houston. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up."

His smile broadened and his blue-gray eyes twinkled. "Looked to me like you were giving them a run for their money out there." He cleared his throat and put on a more appropriate expression. "If you don't me saying so, ma'am."

Chuckling, she shook her head, knowing her hair was surely wild and wishing she could straighten it. "Not at all. I tried to get back to the house to get my rifle. *Then* I would surely have given them a run for their money. Lousy good-for-nothing men."



“Yeah, I seem to remember that you are fond of your rifle.” He laughed.

His hair was sandy brown in a short side-trim style that fitted his face and his neatly trimmed, short beard. He was more than handsome with his square jawline and straight, broad shoulders. But she thought it was more than that about Luke Houston that appealed to her. *And maybe it's just the heat of the moment, all the excitement, and the fact that he just saved my life that makes me feel that way.*

“Yeah, about that.” She lifted her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips.

“No, no. Don't even think about apologizing for it. You were right to do it.” He tipped his head in the direction the men had ridden off in. “Now, I fully understand why you would do it.”

Giving him a serious look, she nodded. “I wasn't going to apologize. I was just going to say that you got off lucky.” She let her eyes rove over his flat stomach and broad chest

before looking him in the eye again. "I didn't leave a single hole in you."

Luke laughed and she joined in. It felt good to laugh. She and her father laughed sometimes, but it never felt as natural as it did with Luke. There was always the unseen pressure between father and daughter, the void that couldn't be filled or ignored. It was the hole left in their lives after her mother's death. The hole her father seemed to be trying to fill with liquor.

"And I'm ever so glad you didn't, Miss Thomas." His face sobered and they stared at each other, falling silent.

The silence stretched out long enough to become awkward. Nervously glancing back at the house, Millie remembered she had put stew over the fire earlier. "Mr. Houston, would you like to come in for a meal? I put stew on earlier and it should be done. I have fresh-baked biscuits to go with it." She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and smiled. "It's the least I can do after..." She looked to

the oak tree. "After what you did for me."

"Miss Thomas, that would be wonderful. I would love to join you for a meal."

Luke followed her onto the porch and wondered what it would be like to be with a woman all the time, to live a stable life, put down roots, and have the pleasure of her beauty, softness, and smiles all to himself. As he passed through the doorway into the kitchen, he breathed deeply of the savory aroma of stew. His belly rumbled noisily as she showed him to the table and went immediately to the pot of stew, stirring it.

Backing away from the pot, she ran her hands over her hair and then down the front of her clothes, straightening her apron. She grimaced as she untied it and draped it over her arm. There were smudges of dirt on her dress and a small smudge on one cheek. He had wanted to wipe it away for her but thought she might be offended at his uninvited touch.

“If you would excuse me for a moment, I should like to freshen up a bit. The stew needs to cook just a few minutes longer.” She touched her hair self-consciously.

“Sure. I’m in no hurry.”

She disappeared into her room and he heard her snuffle once. Her movements were quiet and small. After only a few short minutes, she returned. She had changed into a clean, if plain, dress, tidied her hair, and washed her face. The apron she took from the stand in the corner was crisp white with boldly colored flowers stitched at the bottom corners.

“I’ll check the stew. It should be almost ready.” She turned to the pot again, her expression tight with what Luke could only guess was anxiety over the men who had handled her so roughly.

“It smells great. Cooking like that can make a man hungry even when he’s not hungry.” Luke chuckled, trying to ease her

tension.

“Let us hope it tastes as good as it smells, then.” She spared him a quick glance as she stirred the meal again.

Her grace was pronounced as she moved swiftly around the kitchen, setting out bowls and small plates, gathering cutlery, and retrieving cups. He was mesmerized by the fluid movements of her curvy body under the plain dress. The way her hips swayed as she walked was tantalizing.

Realizing that he shouldn't be thinking that way about her, Luke tried to avert his attention. But she was so attractive that he couldn't quite clear all those thoughts from his head. It was more than her physical beauty that caught and held his attention, he knew. It was also her strength, her caring nature, her resilience. Most women he had known would have been laid up for days after being attacked by three men. And those women would never have felt safe at their own houses again. But not Millie. There she was, going about a meal

for a stranger as if nothing had happened.

She took his bowl and filled it with rich savory stew and brought it back to him. As she set it in front of him, he leaned forward and inhaled the steam. It smelled rich and the broth looked thick. There was so much meat that he made sure there was some left for her own meal before he started eating.

“Did you give me *all* the beef?” He chuckled as she sat down with her own bowl and a plate of warm biscuits.

“No.” She grinned sheepishly. “I have a tendency to put a lot of meat in my stews. There’s plenty if you want a second helping.” She passed him the plate of biscuits.

He took two, hoping it didn’t make him seem rude. He had been hungry earlier, but with the food sitting in front of him, he felt like a ravenous beast and forced himself not to devour the stew.

After his fourth mouthful of stew, he stopped long enough to speak to Millie who sat across from him, daintily eating and smiling softly at him. “This is the best meal I’ve had in months, Miss Thomas.”

Her cheeks blushed prettily. “You’re just saying that. But I’ll take the compliment, thank you.”

“I mean it. I’ve had a lot of meals in a lot of places. This is the best in months, though.” He dipped his bread into the thick soup.

The atmosphere in her kitchen was devoid of tension and they were alone. The quietness was something he wasn’t accustomed to. Normally, he took meals in taverns and saloons where the noise level was always high. What he ate when he was on the trail couldn’t be called meals by any stretch of the imagination: beans, jerky, and grainy, bitter coffee which he usually managed to scorch somehow.

Millie’s cooking though was blue-ribbon

material if he had ever seen it. Her easy company was nice, too. She didn't pressure him to talk, ask him a million questions about his past, his life, or his chosen profession. Millie was different. That made the urge to protect her even stronger.

Before she finished her meal, Millie excused herself to start the coffee. Luke had finished two bowls of stew and four biscuits before Millie had pushed her small serving away after only eating half.

"Thank you for that meal, Miss Thomas. A man can always function better with a full belly." He grinned as he pushed his chair back from the table and turned sideways in it.

"You're most welcome. Thank you again for saving me from those scoundrels of Deacon's." There was a hint of that steely strength in her eyes. Just a flash and then it was gone, replaced by a sweet smile.

Not wanting his thoughts to go astray yet again, he cleared his throat and looked at her



bowl pointedly. “You don’t eat much, Miss Thomas. Can’t keep your strength up like that.” He tried to smile and it faltered, resulting in a crooked grin.

“Seems that all the excitement has finally caught up to me, stolen my appetite. I’m sure I’ll be right as rain again in a few days.” She stood and cleared the dishes from the table. “Would you like coffee now?”

“Yes, please.” Luke watched as a smile played at the corners of her mouth. Such a pretty mouth with full lips that just begged to be kissed. *A man could sure get used to this.*

Luke let his gaze amble around the room. It was tidy, neat, and everything was in order. The place had a woman’s touch, for sure. Dainty lacework doilies, needlework on aprons that hung in the corner, a small vase of flowers set in the window, it was all feminine, soft, and delicate, yet strong, sturdy, and made tough to last. *Just like Millie*, he thought as she poured his coffee.

“Give it a second to cool.” The faintest hint of a smile crossed her lips.

The smile was so seductive to Luke that he wanted to lean toward her and kiss her. But, of course, he didn't.

As Millie poured Luke's coffee, she was caught off guard by the closeness of him and by the serious look in his eyes. It wasn't threatening in the least, but there was something there, a heat that she didn't quite understand. Or she thought she didn't understand.

For one tiny moment, she was sure he would lean over to kiss her. And she was certain that she would have allowed it, appropriate or not. Then he smiled and stretched his lanky frame farther back in the chair, giving her a small, measured smile.

Millie rather enjoyed the way he looked at her. She had also been happy to have a meal with him. It had been a while since her father had sat down to supper with her and it got

lonesome on the homestead. There was no one to talk to, no one to share chores with, only the cows and horses and pigs. Luke's company was comforting, soothing in way she would never have imagined. He was unlike any bounty hunter she had ever met, or even heard of. Not that she had met many bounty hunters, but a few had come through Haven Ridge and a couple of them even stopped at the homestead and spoke with her father when she was younger.

They had been rough, rude, and glowering men in need of baths. Their beards had been long and wiry, matted with dust and dirt from being on the trail, and she distinctly remembered the filthy fingernails of one of them. She had been disgusted by the men and more than a little afraid of them. Her father had invited them in for coffee so they could warm up from the harsh winter chill. Her mother had waited on them and was polite even though she had been scared, too. Millie had seen the fear in her mother's eyes as the men leered at her from the kitchen table.

Luke's fingernails were short-trimmed,

clean, his hands rough, and his clothes had been recently washed. It showed that he took pride in his appearance. But did he always appear clean, trimmed, and groomed? Perhaps any man, after being on the trail for an extended period, would look like the two bounty hunters she remembered from years back. Those other men had filled the room - the entire house, really - with a sense of dread. Luke brought no such feeling into the house. It was quite the opposite. She would like more of Luke's company but didn't think it wise to get involved with a bounty hunter, no matter how different he was.

He had saved her life, though.

She poured her own coffee and took up her seat again wondering if a man like Luke could ever settle down or if he was destined to live a rough life, constantly on the trail, moving from place to place, and blowing around like wheat chaff in the wind. She wondered if his life was very lonely, as hers was at times, with no one to talk to, eat with, or work with. Deciding it was a lonely life, she smiled over her coffee at him, feeling an odd

sort of connection to him.



# Chapter Ten

The twittering of birds outside drew Luke's attention to the window. It was a picturesque scene with a field of tall grass in the center waving in the breeze, a high, craggy mountain in the back, and the deep blue of the cloudless sky capping it. In the distance, a cow lowed and another answered. A sense of ease settled over him.

Looking back to Millie, sipping her coffee, he thought again that he could get used to being surrounded by such beauty and peacefulness. Shaking the thoughts from his mind, Luke returned to the business at hand. "Miss Thomas, I know this might not be the best timing, seeing as how we just had a nice meal and all, but I have to ask you some questions." Luke drank deeply of the coffee. *Not a scorched ground in it*, he thought.

Fidgeting in her seat and turning her cup in an endless circle between her fingers, she nodded and looked away. "Well, I figured you

might.”

“First off, what did Deacon’s men want with you? I would hope that they don’t come out here and harass you like that often.” He studied her every movement and the expression that kept changing as she thought about how to answer him. He had learned over the years that a person’s actions tell the truth even if the person does not.

With her expression settling into a neutral stare befitting a seasoned poker player, Millie said, “Well, they came out here to accuse me of freeing my father.” She stared at him, unblinking.

Luke stared back, keeping his own expression blank. He knew it was a test to see how he would react. Deciding not to press the matter, he smiled wryly at her. Whether or not she freed her father was not the reason he was there. “I’ve met with Sheriff Roach and we talked.” He sat up straighter and then leaned his arms on the table, meeting her gaze again. “We think your father is innocent, Miss



Thomas.”

Her eyes lit up momentarily and then she forced herself to remain in control. Once more, Luke thought how different she was from other women: so disciplined and in control of herself.

“Then why didn’t the sheriff come with you?” She looked at him warily, still spinning her cup between her fingers. Surely, if Sheriff Roach had decided to let this stranger help him, he would have come to her and let her know. But he had just saved her hide from Deacon’s men.

Luke smiled inwardly. *She’s smart, too. Got a good head on her shoulders and always thinking working over the situation for anything out of line*, he thought. “We think your father was framed by Deacon Owens. He’s got eyes and ears everywhere apparently. It wouldn’t be wise for us to let him know we’re working together on this.”

“You mean like not letting people see you

two together.” She studied him and his expressions. His face was unreadable, but his eyes said he was genuine—his gorgeous, slate-colored eyes with their guarded expression.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

She nodded and looked down at her cup as she thought. The cup stopped suddenly as her fingers stilled and she sat back, crossing her arms over her full bosom. Her eyes were stormy, unsettled as she gave him a questioning look.

“How do I know you’re not lying? You could be saying those things to get me to relax and trust you. Deacon’s men lit out of here awfully fast and with very little resistance when you showed up. How do I know you weren’t part of that little scene? Your timing was excellent.” She wasn’t quite glaring at him, but she wore the distrustful expression and rising anger openly.

He shook his head in amazement at the way she could tear up a situation and question

each little part. *She'd make a good lawman or even a good bounty hunter*, he thought. "Miss Thomas, I had nothing to do with what happened earlier. My part in it was running them off. That's all. I rode into town the day your father was found to be escaped from jail after being put there under charges of murder. I don't know Deacon or his men, other than what I've learned since then." He set his cup aside and grinned at her. "Sheriff Roach said I would have trouble getting you to trust me." He chuckled.

"If he told you that, he was right, Mr. Houston." She had calmed a little. That didn't mean she had grown a sudden trust for him though—far from it.

"There's a lot of things about this situation that don't sit right with the sheriff or with me. I honestly believe Deacon framed your father." Luke gave her a sober look.

Uncrossing her arms, she clasped her hands lightly on the table and took a deep breath. "All right. What things don't sit right

with you?” She decided to hear him out. It couldn’t hurt, after all. And the thought of finding a sympathetic party to talk to was nice. That he was handsome in a rugged way, didn’t hurt either.

“For starters, the witnesses. All three stories about what happened match up almost word for word. We know for sure that Carson and Clyde are on Deacon’s payroll. The sheriff doesn’t think Jacob is, but I have my doubts.” He looked to his empty cup. “Would you mind if I helped myself to another cup of coffee?”

She motioned to the stove. “I didn’t make it to look at. It’s there for the drinking.”

Pouring himself another cup, he carried it back to the table. “You want another?” He pointed to her cup.

Shaking her head, she looked at him with astonishment in her eyes. “Um, no. No, thank you.” She stammered, shocked to her core. She had always thought of that as a woman’s job to offer more drinks, more food—anything in

the house was usually a woman's duty to see to.

*Probably never had a man offer to do something so domestic before*, he thought. He hoped that was it and not that his offer had somehow offended her.

Clearing his throat, he continued as his coffee cooled. "Then we have Deacon posting a reward. It was much faster than normal, I can tell you that. And the amount? A thousand dollars? I don't care who you are, a thousand dollars is a lot of money. Rewards like that are usually posted for men who have killed many times, the worst of the worst." He gave her a moment to respond, but she didn't. She was still guarded and that was okay. He understood her unease. "From what I heard about your father, he wasn't a violent man, either. Everyone I talked to agreed that he never even carried a pistol."

Looking up sharply, she shook her head. "No. Papa never even carried a pistol. He owns one—his father gave it to him. But he

never carried it. The worst thing he ever did was get into fist fights every now and then. Mama said it was just a man's way of letting off some steam every now and then." Her eyes took on a far-off look and she chuckled lightly. "Besides, they were never serious fights. No one ever got hurt badly. Papa thought that carrying a pistol made men less likely to use their heads to figure out situations, they were more likely to get angry and resort to the kind of violence that can't be undone with an apology."

Her steely resistance seemed to be fading. It wasn't much. Just enough to give Luke the hope that she would soon realize that he was truthful and he was out to help her and her father, not for the money but because he believed in Isaac's innocence. Getting her to trust him enough to give up her father's hiding spot would still be difficult.

Nodding, Luke pulled his coffee closer. The steam curled into the air. "I believe that you and your father are good folks, Miss Thomas. As good of folks as I've ever met. You're trying to live, trying to make a good

home, and keep your family together. I respect that. You're just good folks caught up in bad circumstances." He paused and took a deep breath. "You're the kind of folks I've spent my whole life trying to help, Miss Thomas. Right's right and wrong's wrong. What's happening to you two is wrong." He could see that she didn't fully believe him yet. That it was causing her so much stress bothered him greatly, but he didn't know how to alleviate it.

"That's exactly what we're doing. We're all each other has out here. The rest of the family, which isn't much, is back east. My father is *all* I have left and I don't believe he killed anybody. He doesn't have it in him to commit murder." Her tone was low but sharp and her hazel eyes were wide. "I won't see him harmed because a bounty hunter is on the trail of that reward money. No matter how appealing your words are, or how nice you are." Mentally, she added that his good looks didn't play into it, either.

"I've just told you what I think. I *don't* believe your father killed that man in The Saloon. I believe he's *innocent*. And that's just

what I intend to prove. Me and the sheriff are working together to see that justice is served and the right man is convicted. I won't stop until we've got the evidence that proves Deacon framed Isaac. You have my word. My word is my honor. This is not about money. I waived my right to the reward money before coming out here."

Luke thought back to his parents and how he had loved them more than anything in the world. He would have given anything to have been able to save them. Never a day passed without something happening that dredged up the old guilt and sadness for him. This day was no exception.

He had saved Millie from Deacon's men and he was glad to have done it. But there was still a hole in his heart for his parents whom he didn't save. Even though he was only a child, he should have been able to thwart those outlaws. He should have been able to do more. He should have been able to save them as he had saved Millie.



Being able to remain emotionally detached had kept him from feeling the sting of loss since his parent's deaths. But something about Millie made it impossible for him to remain aloof with her. That strange *need* to protect her was overwhelming and he didn't understand it.

*If it's true that he had waived his right to the reward money, then what else could he gain from such an endeavor*, she wondered. Something in his mannerisms, not so much in his words, assured her that Luke Houston was a good man. Words could be manipulated, words could lie, but a man's character often lay in his eyes and his mannerisms which were the things not often scrutinized by other men but picked up on by women who had a mind to pick up on such things.

Her mother had always advised her that men were built to be harsher, coarser, and more deceptive to hide their secret emotions. She had said that every man, on the inside, was just as fragile as any woman who ever walked the earth but since it was a man's nature to protect and provide for his family,

he had to keep it hidden. There were ways to catch glimpses of it she had told a very young Millie. One was to watch for tenderness in his eyes when he thought no one was looking. The other was to keep a keen eye on his mannerisms. If his mannerisms were refined and controlled but natural, he was a gentleman, civilized, not given to lies and other low qualities of troublemakers.

Millie took note of the first tender expression when he had sat on horseback with her rifle pointed at him. She had seen his expression soften and his eyes take on the look of a man lost in some much-loved memory. She had seen it a second time as he looked out her kitchen window. And yet again, the tender expression took over his rugged features, only briefly, as he vowed to try and prove her father's innocence.

With no stakes in the circumstances that she could see, in her mind, the money would have been his only objective. Then after she got the measure of him through his words, she felt that he was genuine. He was truthful. As her mother would have said, he was a

civilized gentleman. She smiled at the thought of a civilized gentleman living on the trail, sleeping on the ground, and making a living by tangling with the criminals of the world. Her mother had been a romantic at heart though and she would have called Luke a civilized gentleman.

*More like a diamond in the rough, I would say, Millie thought. A very handsome diamond in the rough.* “It isn’t very often one in my circumstances receives help without a price.” She had to test his resolve one last time about the money. She had to be certain. She stood and poured herself another cup of coffee. Not liking the bitterness but wishing to stay alert, she drank and forced herself not to grimace.

“Without going into a long-winded story, let’s just say that I’ve made my life about righting a wrong that was done a very long time ago. I didn’t do what I should have and a family paid the price for it. I can’t let anything like that happen again.” He kept eye contact with her.

His expression took on that softer appearance again and once more, it was fleeting, quickly covered by the hard-edged look she had first seen in his eyes as he sat on horseback staring at the business end of her rifle. *He certainly doesn't lack determination*, she thought. He had been the reason someone had died in the past. With him being a bounty hunter, she couldn't figure why that bothered him overly much. That the family he spoke of was innocent and had suffered would make anyone sad. But that it had happened a very long time ago... Something wasn't right with his story, but she believed he was genuine in the sentiment. Whatever incident he spoke of had surely been a driving force in his life, it had changed him fundamentally and now, he based his decisions off that event.

“That must have been some tragedy to make you feel so strongly even now.” She hoped he would open up about it. She wanted to learn more about him. He fascinated her.

With a slight nod, he agreed silently, giving no further details.

“You know, my father wasn’t always the way he is now. I mean drinking and laying around the bar at The Saloon. He was a good man, the best I ever knew before Mama died.” Millie sipped the coffee again, hoping to ward off the sadness with the bite of its hot bitterness.

“Sheriff Roach and everyone I spoke to all agree that he was a good man, salt of the earth is what nearly everyone said about him.”

It was heartening to know that others thought of her father in a good light. “He would have done anything for Mama or me. Especially Mama. He loved her so much. I can still remember how they used to laugh and be silly with each other. They were so in love and so happy. Then Mama got sick and the doctors didn’t know what was wrong with her. She dragged on, still happy, still loving Papa and me, never letting on that she was in pain.” Tears prickled at the backs of her eyes and she took a deep breath, sitting up straighter, waiting until her emotions were in check again.

“I’m sorry. That must have been terrible. Did anyone know how sick she really was?” Luke drank more coffee and eyed the pot on the stove.

Seeing the direction of his gaze, Millie smiled. “There’s still more there. Would you like me to pour you more?” She made to stand, and he motioned her to sit.

“No, thank you. I can get it. I don’t mind. Besides, after the time you’ve been having lately, don’t seem right for you to wait on me hand and foot.”

As he stood, she watched his strong, sure movements. There was nothing fluttery or nervous about him. He was back before she had time to let her mind wander too far.

“To answer your question, no. None of us knew how sick she really was. We certainly never had an inkling that she was sick enough to die from her ailment. One doctor called it a wasting disease. That was after she had taken to her bed, too weak and too frail to get up

and go about her normal days. I had noticed her weight loss over several weeks. Papa saw it too. Then her appetite was gone and she barely ate enough to keep a bird alive. We took turns feeding her and sitting with her. Then one day, so thin that she looked like a skeleton, she pushed up against the head of the bed and smiled at me. Her eyes were bright, her chest didn't wheeze when she breathed, and she asked me if I remembered how to preserve vegetables the way she'd taught me. I did. Then she asked me if I remembered where she and Papa used to take me when we had our best picnics and lazy days." Millie paused and looked sharply at Luke. She had almost let it slip about Wilma's Wandering. She wasn't ready to give him that information and chided herself to be more vigilant with her words.

"It sounds like wonderful memories she was talking about. Did you? Remember, I mean?" He smiled, seemingly intent on the story.

Pleased at his attention, she continued. "Yes, I did. And we swapped funny stories

about it for over an hour. Papa had gone to town to buy medicine for her. It was the kind that helps with pain. I was so hoping he would hurry back and see how well Mama was doing.” The memory tore at her heart and she dabbed her eyes. It was painful to relive, but it was also freeing to finally talk to someone about it.

“What did he say when he saw her like that? He must have been really happy.”

“Papa didn’t get to see her that way. She asked me to bring her a sip of water, all the talking and laughing had dried her mouth. So, I went happily to fetch water, thinking she was finally getting over her sickness. When I returned, she lay on her back, staring up at nothing. She had died. There was still a smile on her face. That gave me some hope that at least she passed while lost in some happy memory.”

Luke’s expression dropped and his smile uncurled. “Gosh. That’s awful that he didn’t get to see her while she was happy.” He



looked troubled. His brows were knitted together and he looked at the floor.

Wanting to lighten the mood a bit, and thankful that he had taken such interest in her past, Millie continued. "That's when Papa started going downhill. It was gradual, not like he went from being a near-perfect husband and father to drinking all the time and kicking up a fuss wherever he went." Sighing, she thought how different her father was compared to before her mother's death.

After several quiet moments, Luke said, "Miss Thomas, I just don't know how you remained so hopeful after your mother died like that. That takes a lot of strength, a lot of willpower, and a lot of courage to face every day with hope instead of sorrow and despair."

"My mother was a fountain of quiet strength. She inspired me to do better and be better my whole life. One of her favorite sayings was 'hope blooms eternal, Millie. Don't ever forget that and always have hope even when there seems to be no reason to do

so. Hope blooms eternal.' I held to that after she passed. I held so tight to it that one day, I realized, she was right. There's always hope to be found if one really wants to find it."

He let his gaze drift out over the landscape again. "How can you still speak so fondly of your father after you've had to watch him slowly destroy himself? I'd be hard-pressed to find a good word to say if I was in your shoes. Way I understand it, he gave you very little reason to stand by him the way you have."

Shrugging, Millie smiled. It was obvious to her that Luke had never had such strong family ties. She thought it sad. *Everyone should be blessed with such abundant love from their family.* "You never give up on family, Mr. Houston. Everybody needs somebody to believe in them and never give up on them."

She believed that with all her heart. Even though the past two years had tried to break her hope and her belief, she persisted. Eventually, everything would work out and calm down. One day, she hoped to find a good

man, get married, and have a family of her own. In her mind and heart, that hope remained a bright and shining thing that spurred her on. If she could just get her father to latch onto some hope, her worries would ease.

Luke seemed troubled, saddened even.

“I hope my endless chatter didn’t upset you. It’s just that it’s not often I have anyone to talk to. I just lost my manners for a while, I suppose. I apologize if I’ve upset you, Mr. Houston.” She hoped her story hadn’t affected him so badly.

“No. Your story was wonderful. I’m glad you shared. It just brought up some of my own memories.” He smiled at her, but the smile was a façade for she could still see the sadness peering from his eyes.

Convinced that she had upset him somehow, she felt a twinge of guilt. She knew nothing of his past, really. Maybe she had dredged up something from his past that was

terrible for him. “Good memories, I hope,” she said, hoping he would give her a little more insight into his mysterious past.

“Some. Most, actually. Just like everybody else, though I have some bad ones that I would rather not think about.” He chuckled and rearranged himself in his seat. “After your story, I wanted to tell you that I’m sure that your father is innocent. He’s just been torn down by the loss of your mother. Sounds like she was the love of his life. A man sometimes has trouble recovering from something like that.” He stood and pushed his chair to the table. “I’m going to do everything in my power to see that the truth is uncovered here, Miss Thomas.”

She stood and led him to the door. Saddened that he was leaving so soon but knowing it was really for the best. She should not form any attachment to him. Millie sighed. He stepped to the porch and turned to her. His blue-gray eyes so solemn that she held to the doorframe for support. There was so much emotion locked up behind those gorgeous eyes—and she wanted a chance to get a peek at

that hidden Luke, the one who peered out as he lost himself in thought sometimes.

“Thank you for the meal. The stew was excellent. Best I think I ever had.” He gave her a crooked smile that melted her heart.

“You’re welcome. Thank you for saving me.” She grinned and then feistily added, “Anytime you want more of my famous stew, you just come on back and pay me a visit.”

His smile broadened and his gaze darted up and down the length of her. He was not lingering long enough to seem lewd but giving her a tingle all the same. She didn’t mind even though she highly suspected she should have. It had been brazen of her to tell him to come back, especially since her father was absent and she had no chaperone. People would talk if they found out. As she watched him mount up, tip his hat to her, and smile again, she didn’t care about the possibility of gossip.



# Chapter Eleven

Luke rode back toward Maisy's with an unsettled feeling in his chest. Millie had awakened a longing that he had thought was long gone. Thinking he had forgotten the feeling of having a place to call home, convincing himself by repeating it each day as he took on the job of a bounty hunter, he was shocked to recognize it after so many hard years.

Luke Houston wanted to put down roots and have a family, something he never thought would cross his mind. But it did more than cross his mind. It lingered there, sank into him, and grew like a seed in a garden. If watered with love, that seed would grow. If he could ever break free of his haunting past, Millie could be the woman for him. He could marry her and learn to be the man she needed and deserved.

That wouldn't happen. Not anytime soon and not with Millie. She deserved more. He

had nothing to give her. A life of roaming led to owning nothing. He had a tiny golden brooch that had belonged to his mother and a pocket watch that his father had carried every day. There was nothing else of value in his possession. In his line of work, it didn't pay to keep valuables.

Not wishing to read too much into his feelings for Millie, he concentrated on the trail as he rode. Turning over the facts of the case kept his mind away from his heart where those feelings for Millie had stirred from the first time he had seen her.

After sharing the bigger part of the day with her, there was no way he would sit by and allow anything bad to happen to her—and that included her father. She loved him more than anything and that reflected how he had felt about his own parents. Having them ripped from his life at such a young age had devastated him. It would be no different for Millie if her father was hung for something he didn't do. It would be the equivalent of outlaws gunning him down.



That night, his sleep was more peaceful than usual. Instead of being plagued with nightmares in which he watched his parents' death play out, he was lulled by dreams of Millie and her sweet smile, her bright hazel eyes as she looked lovingly at him, and her touch—soft as a feather, her skin smooth as silk against his rougher skin.

Waking refreshed the next morning, he planned the day ahead of him. As he sat to a hearty breakfast with good coffee and a smile on his face, he realized that he was happy. It wasn't a completely foreign emotion, but it was rare enough for him to take note of it.

Visiting Sheriff Roach was at the top of his agenda. He needed to find out how his visit with Jacob Conley had gone. He hoped it had gone well, but at the same time, he knew better than to get his hopes too high. Jacob was young and often young men in need of money were easily swayed to do terrible things. Including to lie about who had killed his friend.

After thanking the petite, shy woman who had made his meal, Luke set out for the sheriff's station. Before he made it halfway there, three riders stopped in front of him, blocking the road. It was the same three men who had attacked Millie. They walked their mounts closer to him. Wade grinned.

Anger rising to replace his peaceful mood, Luke adjusted in his saddle. "Can I help you gentlemen with something?"

Wade spoke. "Our boss would like a word with you, bounty hunter." He cocked his head toward the east where the sun had risen only an hour earlier.

Luke looked in that direction, squinting against the brightness of the early morning light, and then looked back to Wade. He shook his head. "Sorry, fellas, I'm pretty busy right now, though. Another time, maybe." He clicked his tongue at Chester and pulled the reins to the left, meaning to skirt around the men.

They pulled their horses to that side, keeping him blocked. Stopping again, he thought about his gun. He thought about pulling it and squaring off with them right there. But there were innocent townsfolk milling along the street who might get hurt. Loosening his grip on the reins, he said, "Another time, fellas. I have business to attend to this morning. Come back later and I'll go talk to your boss. How's that?" He had no intention of having a social visit with Deacon Owens, but his men didn't need to know that.

All three men pulled back their jackets, revealing their pistols holstered at their sides. Luke ceased all movement and all attempts at congeniality. He took in each man, his position, and the likelihood of him coming out of a scuffle with them alive. The odds were in his favor, he thought, but the innocents that might be injured or killed stayed his hand. A nerve ticked at the corner of his left eye. His hand itched to reach for his gun.

Then something Millie had said the night before floated back to him. Her father's words. A man with a gun is more likely to resort to

violence instead of using his head to fix a situation. He thought that was close. The meaning was still there. His hand relaxed on the horn of the saddle and he made the extra effort to use his wits instead of his gun to fix the situation.

Deacon's men meant business and they were about the boss's business. They wouldn't be deterred, and he had no doubt it would not bother them to start a gunfight in the middle of town. Men like them didn't care about innocent bystanders.

Wade laughed. "This ain't no invitation you should be declining, bounty hunter." He rested his hand on the butt of his pistol and his fingers drummed the side of it.

Biting back hard on his instinctual urges to fight back, Luke forced a wide smile, adjusted his hat, took up the reins again. "Well then, since you put it so nicely, I don't see how I could decline. If your boss is so determined to see me..." He motioned for them to lead the way.

They rode hard to the east into the glare of the morning sun and Luke pulled his hat low over his eyes. They made good time, but Luke was glad when they finally reached Deacon's ranch. He supposed it was the tension in him at being hauled to Deacon's ranch under threat of force that made him stiff as he dismounted.

Wade motioned for him to follow. "Mr. Owens wants to see you in his office." The other two men followed a few paces behind Luke.

Deacon's house was by far the largest one Luke had ever been in. The ceilings were too high and the paintings of herds of buffalo, horses, and cattle were ugly, in Luke's opinion. The fireplace in the main room would have made three normal sized hearths.

As they passed through it, there was a hallway that stretched to the right. They turned into it and the office was the first room on the left. He counted four doors on the right

and three more on the left as he stepped into the room where Deacon sat reclined behind a large mahogany desk, smiling like a fox that just ate a chicken.

Deacon stood, still smiling his oily smile, and Luke bristled. He didn't like the man. Not even a little bit. "Thank you, Wade." Deacon flapped his hand at Wade, who promptly exited the room, closing the door behind him.

"So, Mr. Houston, did you have a good time with Millie Thomas last night?" He circled the desk, eyes on Luke. "Pretty little thing, she is."

His threatening tone was clear and swept aside any false hope Luke had about it being a more business-like meeting with the man. Luke was overcome by an urge to protect Millie and her reputation. His protectiveness reared its head and he almost raised his fist to the man. At the last second, he clenched his fists, clamped his jaws tight and frowned at Deacon.

Deacon's eyes narrowed and his mouth curled into a menacing grin. His eyebrows lifted, giving him the appearance of a devil. "Oh, it looks like the bounty hunter has gone and developed a soft spot for the poor damsel. How romantic." He laughed.

Luke stepped back a short step, fearing he would cuff the man if he remained in striking distance. He breathed deeply and recounted the men he had seen outside, how many were likely to be inside, maybe hiding in those other rooms. Knowing he was outgunned, Luke gritted his teeth and mustered his determination to see the thing through. Maybe he could find out what Deacon really wanted.

"How much is that soft spot worth to you, son?" He paced to the fireplace and made a show of removing a hand-carved box. He took it back to his desk and set it on the blotter. After a moment, when Luke didn't answer, he rubbed his hand over the blotter. "You know how much this cost me?" He glanced at Luke and then shook his head. "No. Of course, you don't know. How could you? Refined things like this leather blotter all the way from

England has no real value to a man like you. But Millie, now there's something you can appreciate."

"What do you want, Deacon? I have business to attend to elsewhere and I don't have time for your games," Luke said through gritted teeth.

"All right, son, calm down. All I'm saying is that Millie damn well knows where her father is hiding. We all know that here. It ain't no secret, but..." He leaned forward and tapped the lid on that box. "If you could get her to fess up and tell you where the old man is, you could bring him in all nice and quiet like. Bring him here, to me. If you could do that, you could name your price. Fifteen-hundred dollars? Two thousand?" He sat back. "And Miss Millie never has to know. You just have to be sure that the old man is *quiet*, as in *real quiet*, when you deliver him to me."

Luke shook his head more in disbelief than anything. "You want me to manipulate Millie into giving me that information just so I can



go kill her father and bring his body to you?” His voice rose in anger. He fought to regain control before it was lost completely.

“Oh, posh! Don’t get all high and mighty with me, boy. Killing ain’t nothing to your kind. You’re a bounty hunter. The money’s where it’s at and we both know it.” He grinned and put the money in a neat stack at the edge of the desk. “She’ll never be the wiser. You might even take the money and start a life with that sweet little girl. Now, how would that be? That’d suit her real nice. Give her a couple of squalling babies to tend to and she’ll be putty in your hands forever.”

If he ever needed proof that Deacon wanted Isaac dead, there it was. Deacon had laid it all out before him and was ready to pay any price to see it done. Luke pretended to consider the proposal and looked away from the man, knowing his true feelings might show through his eyes. He needed time to think, time to plan, and time to get the sheriff on board.

Growing impatient, Deacon added, "This ain't a fight you want to get involved in, son. Trust me." He stood again and opened the wooden box and pulled out a stack of notes and waved them at him. "You know, you go doing things your own way around here and I can't guarantee little Millie's safety. It'd be such a tragedy for something heinous to happen to her." He flapped the notes at Luke again. "If you ain't got the stomach to do what needs to be done, son, here's five-hundred-dollars—Walkaway money. Just turn your horse in any direction that don't keep you in Haven Ridge and ride off into the night. Don't look back and don't come back. This ain't your fight anyhow."

Eyeing the stack of notes in Deacon's hand, Luke curled his lips in. His contempt for the man was deep and red-hot. He really thought money could buy a man's life or in this case, a man's death. In a bid for much-needed time, Luke played it cool.

Smiling and lifting an eyebrow at the stack of money, Luke rubbed his chin. "You know, that's a mighty tempting offer. Mighty

tempting indeed. Tell you what, give me a day or two to think it over. I have developed a soft spot for Millie, but you know how that goes with men like us. Given time that soft spot will just callous over and disappear, won't it?"

Grinning, Deacon chuckled as he nodded agreement. "I'll give you a day to think on it, son. Give me your answer by tomorrow noon."

"Yep. Tomorrow noon, it is." Luke flashed what he hoped was a smile that said he was really going to consider the stack of money, maybe even the deal to name his own price, and sauntered out of the house.

Wade and the others didn't block his path. They stood off to the side of the house staring openly at him with hate in their eyes. He didn't have a doubt that any one of them would do what Deacon asked if they only had Isaac's location. And that put Millie slap in the middle of trouble. She was the only one who knew Isaac's hiding place, and if Luke didn't get the information from her, Deacon would surely send more of his men to extract it in

any way they saw fit.

The man was brazen, all right. Brazen and untouchable. Waving money around like it was nothing, making a bid for a man's life as if he were God in heaven. It wasn't right and Luke intended to do something about it.

Men like Deacon had stolen his family, upended his life, and set him on his drifting path as an orphaned child. They had shown no mercy, no remorse, and had taken pleasure in their acts of violence. There was absolutely no way he could leave Millie to a similar fate.

In Haven Ridge, there had to be enough decent people left to take a stand against Deacon. He understood that most people would be too afraid of his retribution to take action, though. Men like him were ruthless and would trample over the lives of anyone who stood in his way.

But what was he after? What was his motivation for being so cruel? And what on earth had Isaac Thomas ever done to warrant

such cold-blooded actions from anyone? So, he had turned into a drunk and caused a few barroom brawls, a few pointless scuffles with some of the menfolk. He had never really hurt anyone, other than himself.

Had Isaac just been in the wrong place at the wrong time as the sheriff thought? It was the only likely scenario that Luke could muster. The man had nothing else Deacon would want. His property was inconsequential compared to Deacon's hundreds of acres. Isaac's livestock wasn't enough for Deacon to even look twice at.

There had to be something more that he wanted, much more, else he wouldn't be flashing wads of money at Luke, trying to bribe him into killing Isaac. Men like that never understood that some people, even bounty hunters, didn't always do things for money. Sometimes they did what was right and the money was inconsequential.



# Chapter Twelve

Riding back toward town, Luke kept a close watch over his shoulder. He didn't want one of Deacon's men following him. Instead of talking to the sheriff immediately, he was heading out to the Thomas homestead. He had to make sure she was all right.

He had definitely stirred up a hornet's nest this time, and Deacon Owen was at the heart of the disturbed nest. Luke just needed to sort it all out and find out *why*.

His mind reeled. No way could he ever walk away after spending time with Millie the night before. No amount of money could bribe him into leaving. She hadn't left his thoughts since he had met her. And to hear her name falling from that snake's mouth had sickened him.

*He'll pay for his threats. I'll make sure of it,* he thought as Haven Ridge finally appeared

before him.

Giving Haven Ridge a wide berth, he headed in a northerly, meandering route so as not to be seen by anyone there. After Deacon's threats against her, he just had to be sure she was safe, that he hadn't sent men back out there.

And, another bowl of that wonderful stew wasn't entirely out of the question, either.

More than anything, he wanted to be near her again, and feel that easy comfort as he had the day before. Perhaps he could explore those strange feelings a bit further, figure them out. As he hastened his pace at the midway point, Luke thought he understood those feelings, but he had to be sure. Such a stirring in him could only be love. *But could I be falling in love with her so soon after meeting her?*

That thought remained at the front of his mind as he pushed on toward the Thomas homestead. As before, he stopped at the edge of the property. Adjusting his hat, he noted



that his heart skipped a beat or two as he thought of being near Millie again.

“Come on, Chester. Let’s go see what she’s got cooking for supper tonight. If I’m lucky, it’ll be more stew.” He patted Chester’s neck and the horse whickered, tossing his head as if to say, *Yes, let’s go see.*

Chuckling, Luke walked the horse toward the porch. He dismounted and quickly dusted his pants and shirt. Road dust plumed out around him and eddied in the breeze before disappearing completely.

Pulling a sack of oats from the saddlebag, he fed Chester from his hand. The screen door banged, and Luke turned to see Millie smiling at him from the porch. That smile could have melted the hardest of men into slaving puddles. *Does she even know how much power she has over me, and other men, with just a smile?* He thought she was clueless. There was nothing vain about her or her smile. It was genuine. She was truly happy to see him.

His heart gave the little skip-beat-skip again and he chuckled lightly. "Hello, Miss Thomas."

With her smile widening, she asked, "Did you come for more of my famous stew, Mr. Houston?" The way her face crinkled up when she smiled was gorgeous.

Giving Chester the last handful of oats, he replaced the sack in the saddlebag. Turning to Millie, he dusted his hands and started forward. "Well, now, no one told me you could read minds, too."

Laughing, she tromped down the steps and joined him, smiling up at him with that same look he had seen in his dream of her the previous night. His insides quivered.

"The food's cooking, but it still has an hour or so. I'll show you around the homestead in the meantime. It'll be nice to walk out in the sunshine without having to work for a change." She chuckled and took a few steps, motioning for him to follow. "Come

along. I don't bite."

As she led him to her vegetable garden, he forced his mind to concentrate on her words and not the way she moved, or the way the wind blew her hair out to the side, or the way it cascaded down her back in waves when it fell back into place. He fought the urge to touch her hair, feel its silkiness in his hand, against his face.

Sighing inwardly, he thought how rotten a time he was having, and then she touched his arm. It sent shockwaves of excitement over his body; his eyes immediately locked on hers. She had his full attention, no more wandering mind.

"This is my favorite spot. I love the vegetable garden." She walked between rows of bean vines, trailing her pretty fingers along the tops. "Last year, I preserved enough to give to a widow and her sister in town. Mama always saw to it that the women were well cared for. She loved them like they were her own family, so I took up that mantle when

Mama passed.”

“You preserve them? Not many women I’ve met do that. I guess they don’t know how or don’t want to.” Luke took a leaf between his fingers and caressed it. It was fuzzy. He smiled. “It’s been a long time since I walked in a garden.”

He reached for a bean and snapped it off the vine, held it to his nose, and inhaled. The aroma brought a wave of memories rushing back and he let them play out for a moment. They were all memories of his mother and him in their garden and sitting on the porch taking the strings off the beans and snapping them into small pieces so she could boil them for supper.

“It’s not hard, and I love how the food looks when you get it finished. Sitting in rows on the pantry shelves, reminding you in the deepest winter that there was summer before the snow and there will be another after the snow.” She smiled over her shoulder at him. “It kind of gives me hope if you take my

meaning.”

Nodding, he bit the green bean in half and then made a face at the bitter taste. Millie laughed as he spat it out.

“They’re not so good raw, are they?” She covered her mouth and giggled again. “Papa loves them raw or cooked. He loves his green beans and his tomatoes. I prefer my beans cooked and my tomatoes raw.”

Grinning sheepishly, Luke tossed the remainder of the bean to the ground. “I think I prefer my beans cooked, too. It just smelled so good.”

“Come on. I’ll show you the big fields. We’ve not planted in them for a while, well, since Mama took sick. About three years now, I guess, since we had anything in them.” She walked between the vegetable garden and a field of wildflowers that ran far off into the distance to butt up to a mountain.

“What did you plant there before? I can’t see a need for any more than what you’re already growing here.” He pointed to the vegetable garden. It was even bigger than the one his parents had and theirs had fed a family of three without worry.

“Well, we have four of those big ole fields. We grew hay in one to help feed the livestock through the winters. In another, we had corn; Papa stored the grain in the silo out there. He made a little money selling to people. Another was full of beans. When I was very little, I remember people coming from all around to pick those beans. Papa let them pay whatever they could afford, which means he let a lot of the beans go for free. That was Mama’s idea to let people pay and pick what they needed. And the last field, we usually split it with potatoes, sugar beets, pumpkins, and melons.”

“Was it one of the fields where people could pick what they needed?” Luke had never heard of anyone doing something so grand just to help the less fortunate.

“Sometimes. There was an old Irish man who owned a store way out in the boonies, and he would buy up all that field produced and a lot of the beans and corn, too. He sold them at his store.” Color blushed her cheeks.

Luke didn't know if the wind, the walk, the sun, or her own passion for her homestead had pinkened her cheeks, but he liked it. He had no idea their homestead was so large, or that her family had made any money from it. Looking back at the meek house, he guessed they hadn't made much money. Mostly, they had just helped others because they were good, decent people.

As they passed by the large barn, she pointed out that she had ten cows and five pigs, several chickens, and three horses.

“That's quite a bit of livestock for one person to take care of. That with the gardening and upkeep of the house must wear you out.” Luke made a mental note to stop by the barn on their way back. He was quite interested to see how far their land stretched

into the beautiful landscape ahead.

Scrunching up her face, she looked toward the sky and considered it. “Sometimes. But then I think of what my work accomplishes, and I’m not so tired anymore. Besides, I like to stay busy. It takes my mind off Papa’s drinking, and the lonely thoughts I have about my future.”

Shocked, he asked, “Why would you think your future will be lonely? A pretty woman like you must have suitors. You could have your choice of men.”

She shook her head and looked down as they walked. “I haven’t had time for suitors. And, I don’t want my future to be bleak. I want to have a family.” She smiled wistfully at him and dipped to pick a wild yellow flower from the path. She twirled it between her fingers. “I’d love to find the right man and fall madly in love, like Mama and Papa were, have babies to love and cuddle and spoil. I want the responsibility of holding a family together, surrounding myself with their love, and giving



mine to them. That would be perfect.”

She looked dreamily toward the far horizon. As he imagined her perfect future, a longing sprang to life deep in his soul. He wanted those things, too. Wanted them more than he could ever have imagined.

Casting a furtive look to her, he thought she was the one he wanted to have those things with. Him, Millie, her with a baby on her hip, cheeks rosy and face lit with a loving smile. A little boy who looked like him, following him around, playing games, and learning from him. It was a beautiful picture. One he would hold in his heart forever.

“How many kids do you want, Mr. Houston?” She kept her eyes on the horizon and her leisurely pace steady.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never given it much thought, really.” He looked back to her and saw her lightly shocked expression. It made him rush to explain. “Not that I never want kids, but in my line of work, well...” He

shrugged. In his line of work, there would be no settling down and having a family.

She nodded solemnly and looked back to the horizon. "I think family is the most important thing in life."

"I would have to agree." He recalled how his family had been so abruptly and prematurely snatched from him.

Suddenly, she pointed to the north. "This field, I was thinking of putting cattle on it. Not a lot, but enough to make some money. It needs the fence repaired up here in front, and one built along the back to keep them from being lost or stolen." She grinned up at him. "What do you think? Would that be a good idea?"

Luke gave her an astonished look. "Miss Thomas, I really don't know. I don't know anything about cattle or farms, or much of anything just to be honest. All I know is bounty hunting, living on the trail, finding people who don't want to be found. I'm good

at that stuff.”

“Aw, pish-posh. You could plow a field or put up a fence easy, I’m sure. If I can do it, so can you.” She flapped the yellow flower playfully at him. “The end is just here. We can turn back now. The food should be done when we get back.”

The house looked tiny from where they stood. The barn, though huge when he was close to it, now also looked diminished.

They passed back between the fields and turned for the barn. She pointed out the small field below the barn where the cows ambled most of the time. Chickens clucked and fussed around her feet as she walked into the barn. Laughing, she gently shooed them aside.

“They want me to feed them. I usually carry a pocketful of corn for them.”

As Luke looked in at the two horses, something bothered him. She pointed out

Brandywine, her horse. Then she told him about Blue Boy, the old horse who looked content to stand inside, munching on hay.

“What about the other horse?” Luke recalled that she had said there were three horses in the barn.

Stumbling over her words, she laughed. “What other horse? There’s only two and you can plainly see them both.”

Nodding, he looked to the empty stall where a third horse had been until recently, but he said no more about it. That was most likely the horse she had packed with supplies for her father.

They returned to the house, and the smell of beef stew greeted him as he mounted the steps to the porch, and his belly grumbled.

Sitting at her table, he felt comfortable. It was the feeling he used to have as a kid when he and his parents would go into town for a

day and then return home, tired, happy, content. He had forgotten that feeling, but now it rushed over him, and his longing for a settled life with Millie rose to the fore again.

As she served the meal, he looked out the window at the field below the barn. The cows grazed lazily in the afternoon sun. Clouds crossed the sky, dappling the ground with momentary, moving shadows. Millie hummed softly behind him.

*Could we ever be together since we're so different? She was raised in a domestic life, a settled life; I was thrown to the wind, orphaned when I was a child, raised myself.*

Millie needed a man, but he didn't think it was him. She deserved better. A man with his skills would be useless on a homestead. She needed someone who could help her, a man that knew what needed to be done and could do it. Not a man she would end up having to teach like a child, or worse, end up doing the work herself because he was incapable.

He sighed as she brought a plate of biscuits to the table; this one piled high with the fresh bread.

“One big bowl of Millie’s famous stew, sir.” She giggled and set the steaming bowl in front of him.

“That smells delicious!”

Surely, he was getting ahead of himself with her. There was time to decide. There was no rush that he could see. He would have to think it over long and hard considering the offer made to him by Deacon.

The more he thought on it, the more he worried that there was no way out that would allow Millie to trust him.

Although he admitted that he had never given family life much thought, she knew that he had little choice but to think on it after her romantic notions had been let free on their walkabout earlier.

She sat across from him, all nerves, and fidgeted with her food, pushing it around more than eating it. They reached for the biscuits at the same time, and his hand brushed the side of hers. Neither of them moved for a long moment. Nor did they make eye contact.

The touch of his skin sent chills over her and she shuddered involuntarily, hoping he'd not seen. The air seemed too hot and too thick to pull into her lungs. She wanted to feel his hand against her cheek. How wild would her heart beat then? She thought it might stop completely.

Finally, he pulled his hand back, his pinky caressing the side of her hand. She looked up sharply, sure that her heart was in her eyes at that moment, heat rose to her neck and crawled to her cheeks.

He smiled and she saw the same nervousness in his face. He wanted to touch more than her hand but, like a true gentleman,

he held himself in check. He had restraint; she believed he might possess more self-control than she ever could.

His low voice rumbled. "I'm sorry. Go ahead." He pulled his hand back to his bowl and held her gaze.

Giving a breathy chuckle, she nodded. "Thank you." She took a biscuit that no longer interested her and sat holding it, feeling like a nitwit, as he took his.

Propping the bread on the inside of her bowl, Millie made a conscious effort to pull back on her runaway emotions. She needed to be concentrating on her father's situation and how best to help him.

She wondered if they could ever be together. They were very different and had been raised differently. Could they learn to mesh their two worlds together and make one out of them? Could they ever be happy together?



Clearing her throat, she asked, “So, any news about my father’s case? Have you found any evidence that might prove he’s innocent?” She hated to change the atmosphere but felt it was necessary before she made a fool of herself.

“I talked to Deacon earlier. I know enough to convince me and Sheriff Roach, but it’s different when it comes to convincing a judge. It has to be solid evidence, something they can see and touch and turn in their hands. Something that leaves no doubt.”

“And do you suppose you’ll be able to find such evidence that points away from Papa?” She pushed her stew away, losing interest in her food altogether.

Luke nodded and swallowed the last of his stew. He pushed his bowl away, too. “I’m sure the evidence is there. Without it, there’s no hope. Without it, a judge is only going to hear three testimonies that say your father committed this murder. There’s a town full of

people who saw Wade apprehend him outside The Saloon after it happened, and I'm sure they'll agree to it." Luke looked dejected.

Millie thought she probably looked the same. She sure felt that way after hearing what he had to say. She had purposefully kept her mind from lingering over the possible trial, not wanting to face the fact that she could lose her father even if he did get a fair trial.

"Miss Thomas, I know this must be tearing you apart inside, but remember, I promised to help you and your father. I won't let anything happen to him." He reached across the table and patted her hand reassuringly.

*If you only knew the effect your touch has,* Luke, she thought as she nodded. "Thank you. I don't really understand why you're so intent on helping us, but I'm grateful all the way to my heart."

"I hope I can bring you good news tomorrow or the next day. There are still a few

people I need to talk to. Sheriff Roach is one of them. He was setting some things in motion when we last spoke.” He looked longingly at her.

His gaze roamed over her face and it had a weight that she couldn’t explain, it was as if he had caressed her physically. *Maybe, she thought, he’s holding back until we get the situation with Papa straightened out.*

“I hope so too, Mr. Houston. This is driving me crazy. I don’t know what to do, where to turn, who to trust. I can’t bear it much longer.” Tears stung her eyes without warning; one broke free and trickled partway down her cheek before she could stop it. Turning away, she swiped at it, embarrassed for Luke to see such a sappy display of female emotion.

“Miss Thomas, do you think I could ask a favor of you?” He smiled gently at her—a soft upturn at the corners of his mouth.

She nodded. “Anything.” She knew that

was broad and not too smart to say to most men, but she didn't want him to hear the sob in her voice.

“Could we do away with the formal names? We're going to be seeing a lot of each other, and as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather you call me Luke.”

Slowly, she turned to him. From the tone of his voice to the set of his shoulders, she knew that he didn't mean they would see more of each other only because of her father's situation. He had meant even after that.

Nodding, she returned his smile and began to feel easier in her heart and in her mind. “To be honest, I would much rather be called Millie.” She paused and then grinned impishly. “Luke.” She loved the way his name rolled off her tongue.



# Chapter Thirteen

As he rode off, Luke looked back over his shoulder and waved to Millie, who stood at the top of the steps. She waved back and gave him a bright smile.

With his mind put at ease that she was okay, that Deacon hadn't sent any men back to her place. Luke turned his mind once again to the situation with Isaac Thomas. Though he had agreed with the sheriff about giving Mary Preston more time to grieve before questioning her, he now needed answers, and he needed them fast. Millie's safety was on the line. If Mrs. Preston was as good a person as everyone believed her to be, Luke thought she would forgive his intrusion under the circumstances.

Nearing Haven Ridge, Luke mentally listed all the facts he had gathered about the case and weighed them against what he felt about it. No matter how he turned it, the evidence all pointed to Isaac being a murderer. But his

gut still told him that Isaac was innocent. Whatever was going on in Haven Ridge was much more than the murder of Samuel Preston.

Stopping on the outskirts of town, he searched the landscape to his back, making sure he wasn't being followed. The ordeal with Deacon earlier had put him on edge, made him more cautious than usual. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was either being followed or at least being watched.

After a few minutes, he saw no movement in the direction of Millie's place, and he moved on, riding into Haven Ridge just to get an idea about how many of Deacon's men might be on the lookout for him.

It seemed Deacon's men were absent from town, or they were cloistered inside The Saloon, which seemed to be a favorite hangout for a lot of them. Riding north again, Luke kept his pace slow, as if he were in no particular hurry to get anywhere.

Seeing no one suspicious, he continued until he was out of the town limits again and then he turned Chester and headed in a southwest direction, toward the Preston ranch. Once he had gone far enough that no one would be able to see him from town, he relaxed and went over the questions he most needed Mary Preston to answer.

His time was running short. He had to give Deacon an answer the next day. Even with that weighing on his mind, he found that his mind kept circling back to Millie. It was unusual for him to be so distracted by thoughts of a woman; or by any thoughts at all. Luke had never had trouble concentrating on a job before, but something about Millie demanded his attention.

She was a fine woman—one of the best he had ever met. Sweet, loving, passionate, strong, and fiercely protective, she would make some lucky man a wonderful wife someday. What more could a man ask for in a wife than Millie Thomas? She encompassed every virtue he could think of.



Though settling down had never crossed his mind as more than a passing fancy, he thought about it a great deal after hearing Millie talk about what she wanted for her own future. She had painted such a lovely picture of a loving family that he could see it in his mind's eye. It was a bright and vivid moving portrait of ideal family life.

He had read her like a book as they walked together earlier, and the look in her eyes, her reaction at his accidental touch at the table, the way she stood watching him ride away, all pointed to what he already knew—Millie was taken with him. He wondered if she had read his feelings as easily.

With only the skills of a bounty hunter, Luke thought he didn't stand a chance of being a good prospect for Millie, though. He didn't even know how to mend a fence. Heck, he didn't even know how to take care of chickens or a garden, how would he ever be able to take care of a family? It seemed that every time he got close to someone, something terrible happened. Most of the people he had ever been close to had ended up dead. He had

to wonder if the same wouldn't happen to Millie if he allowed himself to get close to her.

He would never be able to forgive himself if that happened.

Blowing out a sigh of defeat, he urged Chester to move a little faster.

It scared him that he was so drawn to her emotionally. Simply being close to her brought him so much comfort and a warmth spread through his chest when he heard her voice. He had always prided himself in his ability to turn off his emotions in any situation.

*Am I slipping? Has this life finally weakened me enough that I can't control my feelings anymore?*

He wanted this thing with Isaac settled. Afterward, he could concentrate on what to do about his feelings for Millie.

About a mile from town, the Preston ranch came into view. The house was larger than Millie's house. There was little movement near the house. Luke thought it was probably because of Samuel's death. The family and the workers were still in a period of mourning. The work that was going on had to be done. He understood that not even a death could bring a complete halt to the work necessary on a ranch to keep it financially stable.

An older lady in a black dress sat on the porch of the ranch house as he approached. She was alone, looking out over the ranch from her rocker. She eyed him suspiciously but didn't get up from her seat. He surmised that she was Samuel's widow.

Tipping his hat, Luke dismounted. "Ma'am. You are Mrs. Preston, I presume." He walked up the steps and onto the large porch.

"I am." She remained seated, assessing him coolly.

Removing his hat, he stepped closer and

looked around, ensuring no one was near enough to overhear their conversation. "I'm sorry to intrude during your time of grief, Mrs. Preston. I hope you understand that it is necessary. I'm working with Sheriff Roach. We're trying to settle the case of your husband's murder, ma'am."

"I would thank you to know your name, sir." The lines in her face deepened.

"My name is Luke Houston. I'm a bounty hunter."

She nodded slightly. "I could have guessed your profession, Mr. Houston. Unless I am severely mistaken, you and Sheriff Roach both know who killed my husband. What are you doing to ensure that justice is served? Have you found Isaac Thomas? Have you interrupted my mourning to search here for him?" Anger laced her words and tightened her expression.

"No, ma'am. I'm here looking for answers." He shifted from foot to foot

nervously. "The way I see it, Isaac is innocent. More innocent folks could get hurt if I don't get to the bottom of this."

Her eyes blazed with fury. "Mr. Houston, I don't know what you're thinking, but there are several eyewitnesses who *saw* Isaac kill my Samuel. It is an affront to his memory that you are standing here now, telling me Isaac is *innocent*. I won't hear it." She stood abruptly and flapped her hand in the direction of Haven Ridge. "I would thank you to remove yourself from my property before I have some of my men remove you forcibly." Her back was ramrod straight, her shoulders squared, head held high. She would not back down. She was not a woman to be swayed easily.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Preston, but Sheriff Roach feels the same as I do. We are certain that Isaac was framed for the murder. Deacon Owens is behind it. I just need some answers to help me understand why."

The anger in her eyes turned to fear, and she quickly looked around before motioning

Luke to follow her.

At the mention of Deacon's name, her blood ran cold. The young Mr. Houston was obviously new to Haven Ridge, or he wouldn't have been so bold as to throw an accusation against Deacon Owens into the open air like that.

Taking him into the sitting room, Mary offered him a seat. "Please, don't say anything else just yet. I'll be right back." She stepped out of the room and found her cook in the kitchen. She told her that no one was to disturb her and her guest.

Seeing Mary's reaction to Deacon's name, Luke knew she had information that could help him and the sheriff solve the case. She came back and shut the door before taking a seat.

"I apologize, Mr. Houston, but I don't feel comfortable discussing Deacon Owens where someone might overhear. It's hard to know who you can trust when it comes to that man."

Mary's composure returned, but the fear was still in her eyes.

"I know you're afraid, but the only way we're going to uncover the truth about your husband's death and keep other folks from getting hurt is for you to tell me what's really going on. Why did Deacon want Samuel dead, Mrs. Preston?" Luke watched Mary's expression change like the ripples in a pond from sad to angry and back again.

Sighing heavily, Mary let her gaze drift out the window. "You know, Mr. Houston, when I was a young girl with a headful of dreams and a heart full of love, I followed Samuel out here. He told me such wonderful stories about Colorado, running our own ranch, forging our own paths, that I was taken with the idea long before he and I were wed." A nostalgic smile lit on her face. "We were married and immediately we set out for new territory. Oh, how my mother cried. My sister too."

"Where were you from originally? If you

don't mind my asking." Luke had thought the Prestons were local.

"We both lived in Massachusetts. Now that Samuel is gone, there is nothing for me here in Haven Ridge anymore. Nothing left for me in Colorado, actually. I'm going to go back East and live with my sister. Without Samuel, this all means nothing to me." Her heart twisted in her chest. The pain of Samuel's death seemed more than she could bear, and she couldn't stand to remain there. Every day, seeing the house they built together, working the land that had been their dream. Somehow, it seemed wrong to continue without him.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Preston." Her sadness was overwhelming. Her entire life had been torn asunder by one act of violence. Even more reason to find out what he could about Deacon's involvement.

"For my husband's death? Thank you. But don't be sorry that I've nothing left here. Samuel and I made a good life. We were never blessed with children, but we lived our dream



anyway. As adults, we realized those dreams we had as kids back in Massachusetts. Not many people can say that. Now that dream is over, and I want to go back home, back to what's left of my family."

Time for reminiscing wasn't a luxury he had at the moment. "Mrs. Preston, I hate to push, but if we could get back to the murder? I understand Jacob Conley and your husband were good friends." He waited for her reply, but she merely nodded as she dabbed at her eyes. "Jacob was with Samuel in The Saloon that night; he stated that Isaac shot Samuel, but I can tell you with certainty that Jacob wasn't telling the truth." He hoped to urge some response from her, goad her back on track.

"If Deacon had his men kill Samuel, you will have a very hard time convincing Jacob to change his story. He has a young family and a lot to lose. If Deacon threatened him in any way, he won't easily jeopardize their safety and you can't blame him. Deacon is a dangerous man. He's a coward and he's greedy; that's a deadly mixture." The sadness

had gone from her face and it was replaced with a wary, fearful look again.

Luke decided he didn't like either of her expressions. They made him angrier at Deacon. "No, I guess one couldn't blame him for doing whatever was necessary to protect his family."

"You knew that my Samuel had been leading a small group of local ranchers in resisting Deacon's plans to exert more power over the local cattle operations, didn't you?" Mary sat forward in her seat, her eyes lighting up for the first time.

"No, I sure didn't. Seems that no one thought it was important enough to mention." Luke shook his head.

She nodded. "Yes. He had been organizing for quite a while, a few months at least. At first, he didn't say anything to me because he knew I wouldn't go along with it. Everyone knows that Deacon's dangerous, and I would have demanded that Samuel stop trying to

push back, but he didn't tell me until there were several other families involved." She held her hands up and then let them flop to her lap. "Just like Samuel, I thought there was safety in numbers. The more men he had backing him up, the less likely Deacon was to retaliate. We were foolish."

Luke had a definite motive for why Deacon would want Samuel dead. "Did Jacob know about this?"

"Jacob was the first to join the cause. Him and a couple of the others had large families, young families, and they were trying hard to carve out a life for them. Being a cattle rancher isn't easy, but it's much more difficult when you have someone like Deacon trying to take a big chunk of what you earn by the sweat of your own brow. It's not right." Mary studied Luke's eyes. He seemed to be a man of integrity, a man who wanted justice. There was a kindness in his eyes, a sympathy that she could discern.

"Mrs. Preston, I think you have just given

me the answer I was looking for. If there was ever a motive for Deacon wanting Samuel dead, you've just revealed it." He stood. "Thank you for your time, and for trusting me with this information. Just as an added measure, you should have your workers take shifts through the night, keeping watch, just in case Deacon gets it in his head that I got information from you. Who knows what he's capable of?"

Mary stood. Deacon didn't worry her any longer. Not really. In her mind, there was nothing more he could do to her—he had taken everything she cared about if he was the one who had Samuel killed. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that Luke was right about the incident.

"Thank you for your concern and thank you for wanting to find the real murderer. After this difficult talk we've had, I believe you're correct. My hope is that the right man hangs for my husband's murder, and I think you're the man who will see to that." The sheriff and Mr. Houston would have to see to justice. Though she wanted to be present when

the sentence was handed out, she had no wish to be present when it was carried out. She had seen enough death to last the rest of her life. Seeing Samuel laid out in his coffin had nearly done her in. She was more than ready to leave Haven Ridge.

Nodding solemnly, Luke opened the door. "Sheriff Roach will help me prove that Deacon was behind it. We'll see justice served for Samuel, and for you, Mrs. Preston. You have my word."

She let a smile touch her lips briefly and nodded to him as he turned away in the foyer. He was a driven young man, driven by something more than a sense of right and wrong like Sheriff Roach, but she couldn't quite figure what it was. She just hoped it wasn't something that would be detrimental to his future happiness. Everyone deserved to be as happy as she and Samuel had been. That kind of love and happiness made life worth living and helped one through the tough times and struggles.



# Chapter Fourteen

After speaking with Mary, Luke's hopes were high that everything would turn out fine. He wanted to assure Millie of that and headed back to her place. He found that he looked forward to seeing her, giving her news that might bring a smile to her beautiful heart-shaped face.

The sun had passed the mid-heaven point and evening was near. It had been a long and tiring day already, but the ride toward Millie rejuvenated him. Luke had persevered and was happy with his rewards for another day of work. A motive to pin on Deacon Owens seemed like a blessing and he couldn't wait to tell Millie.

Knowing Deacon's motive made him realize that the man was a serious threat to Millie and her father. He wouldn't think twice about having either of them killed. Not if it meant saving his own hide. Luke hoped the sheriff was treading safely with whatever

information he had gathered. He also hoped Sheriff Roach had contacted the circuit judge and that he could arrive sooner than scheduled.

As he tethered Chester outside Millie's house again, the door opened and she stepped to the porch, smiling. The late-day sunlight cast its golden light on her, and she looked angelic. Her hair had been lightly pinned back at the nape of her neck, and her dress, though modest, hugged her hourglass figure.

“Have a hankering for more of my famous stew already?” She grinned, warmed all the way to her bones at the sight of Luke again so soon. She had thought he wouldn't return until the next day. She could almost let her daydream take hold and picture him as her husband returning home after a hard day at work. Almost. She didn't want to get too far into that fantasy with him actually standing before her.

Laughing, he shook his head. “Not that I'm opposed to another bowl, but that's not why I



came back so soon.” He joined her on the porch, wanting to kiss her upturned face as she smiled warmly at him. *Is this what it would feel like to come home to her in the evenings?* He stepped back half a step to quell the urge to kiss her. If it was like this every day, he thought settling down might not be such a bad thing after all. She was enough to make him rethink his whole outlook on married life.

“Well, by all means, let’s go inside and have a sit-down. I’ll make coffee if you want.” She headed for the kitchen, fighting to keep the bounce in her step down to a normal stride.

He followed her. “Coffee actually sounds really good right now. It’s been a long day.” He sat at the table. “I have found out some good news, Millie; that’s why I came back today. I couldn’t wait until tomorrow to tell you.” He couldn’t stop the smile that spread over his face or the warmth and joy that took hold of his heart.

She nearly dropped the coffee container.

Her eyes widened and she moved to the table. “Really? What’s the good news, Luke?” She sat on the edge of her seat with the coffee can clasped to her chest.

Excitement lightened her eyes and her softly arched brows shot up toward her hairline. She looked like a child about to receive a much-anticipated gift and his heart thudded wildly at her seeming innocence. He would do anything to protect her and keep that sweetness, that pureness safe from the hard world.

“I told you that I had to talk to some people when I left you earlier.” Her expression of wide-eyed expectation moved him and made his heart melt a little. It was difficult to keep the huskiness from his voice. No woman had ever affected him so deeply.

Nodding excitedly, she said, “Yes. I recall.”

“I talked to Mrs. Preston.” He was gaining control of his emotions again, fearing that he

was losing too much control to someone who might not ever be romantically interested in him.

Her expression changed in an instant to one of shock. “Oh, Luke, but she’s still in mourning for poor Samuel.” She set the coffee can on the table and looked troubled.

Quickly, he sat forward and held out his hands. “I apologized for intruding. She was cordial and said she understood once I explained the situation.” He saw that she was still troubled. “It was necessary to speak with her, Millie. She told me about Samuel leading a group of local cattle ranchers to stand against Deacon Owens.” He smiled broadly, thinking that would explain everything.

Confused, she tilted her head, trying to figure out why that was the good news. Her muddled brain wouldn’t make the connection if there was one. “I’m sorry, but how does that help us? Lots of people don’t like Deacon or the way he does things around here.”

Seeing that she truly didn't understand and that he had flubbed the big reveal that should have made her instantly happy, Luke cleared his throat. "I told you that Deacon had to be behind Samuel's death, but we didn't have a motive or any evidence. Now we have the motive, Millie."

She thought about it for a moment longer. It seemed to make a dim connection in her mind. "You think that Deacon found out about Samuel's group and had him killed for it? I don't know, Luke. Why would he feel the need to kill Samuel for organizing a small group? Deacon's so powerful and has so much money that Samuel's little group surely wouldn't have posed such a threat to him."

"Because it was a small group that might have prevented him from exerting a large amount of control over the local ranchers. Mrs. Preston said Deacon wanted the control so he could take a portion of the profits from the ranchers. Samuel and some of the others were going to keep that from happening." He smiled again, feeling victorious even though it was a small triumph and he hoped she would

be as happy about it as he was.

Suddenly, the pieces all fit together. “Samuel would have been messing with Deacon’s money in a sense. And, we all know that Deacon is all about money, especially money he doesn’t have to actually work for.” She stood. “If this was his motive, then the evidence must be there, Luke! That means Papa will be cleared and he can come back home soon.”

She headed to the stove and started making coffee. Her fingers fumbled and her hands shook, but it was okay. At least it was caused by a good turn of events.

He stood, caught up in her excitement. “That’s right. All I have to do is work it over in my head for a while longer and I’m sure I’ll figure out where to look for the evidence that would convince a judge.”

She stopped making the coffee and turned to him, nibbling at her thumbnail. She stepped close and looked up at him. Her innocence at

that moment nearly turned him into a puddle. Her big hazel eyes held such softness that it overwhelmed him. *I would do anything to get her to look at me like this every day*, he thought, his breath hanging up in his lungs. Her scent was sweet and clean, like honeysuckle as she took another tentative step toward him. She was close enough to hug, but he stood still, waiting.

“Luke. I want to tell you where my father is. Since you’re so close to uncovering the truth of this case, I think it’s time you knew.” She took a deep breath, hoping she was doing the right thing. It felt right to tell him.

When he found his voice again, he nodded. “Okay, Millie. I’m listening.” The room had grown very warm, almost uncomfortably warm. His heart thudded hard in his chest and a slight tremor ran through his arms.

“Wilma’s Wandering. That’s what he named the place. He said if my mother were a place, it would be Wilma’s Wandering. It’s a

large ravine about ten miles west of here. You have to go back to the midpoint and veer off the trail for a ways. There's a little mountain path that heads back in this direction, but it takes a more northerly turn somewhere parallel to this property, then it goes straight west on flat ground for a few miles. The path peters out, but if you keep straight, Wilma's Wandering is out there." She stepped closer; she couldn't resist any longer. Tiptoeing, she placed her hands against his chest. Leaning toward him, she brushed her lips very lightly over his and her heart nearly stopped.

At first, she thought he wasn't going to respond. She had been too brazen and had shocked him. Perhaps even offended him. Just as she started to pull away, he kissed her back and her heart skipped a few beats.

He had earned her trust completely and had done much to procure her heart as well. She wanted him to know how she felt. Her eyes fluttered open and she pulled back. Elation spread through her body, invigorating her, and a new feeling flooded her heart for Luke.

As his eyes slowly opened, she smiled, willing him to feel her budding love for him. His hands were on her upper arms, gripping her firmly but gently, his thumbs caressing little circles that sent shivers down her spine.

In the moment before either of them spoke, Millie was certain there was some way they could be together. It didn't matter if he knew nothing of domestic life—she did, and she would teach him, help him. As she looked into his eyes, she could see her future and it had never seemed so full and happy.

It would all be okay and everything would work out. They would make a way; they could forge their own path into the future.

He breathed out a deep sigh and pulled her to him, hugging her tight. In turn, she wrapped her arms around him and laid her face against his chest, taking comfort from his touch.



“Tell me everything is going to be okay and I’ll believe you, Luke.” The manly smell of him was intoxicating.

Without pausing to think, he kissed the top of her head. “Everything is going to be okay.”

In that moment, as he held her close, Luke realized that Millie was not fragile and vulnerable as he had first presumed. The time he had spent with her had shown him that she knew who she was, she knew what she wanted from life. She was strong and independent.

*Millie isn’t the one who needs saving... I am.*

Luke had no idea what kind of man he really was. He had lived an empty life, constantly on the move, constantly on the hunt, and had never slowed down long enough to analyze himself. He was only a shell of a man.

His insides twisted with the surety that he

was not good enough for Millie. She deserved more from a man. She at least deserved a man who knew what he wanted in life, and Luke did not know. He had thought his only desire was to hunt down outlaws, protect other families from the same atrocity his had suffered, and maybe gain redemption for not stopping the murder of his parents.

Millie looked up at him, leaning to brush another kiss over his lips. Abruptly, he pulled back, dropping his hands from her, and looking to the floor.

“Don’t, Millie. We shouldn’t.” He looked up at her with an expression that she thought was pure, heart-rending sadness at first.

Shocked, she let her eyes close for a moment, trying to think. She had felt him respond to her touch, to her words, and had heard his voice change and soften with reciprocated feelings for her. “What do you mean? Luke? What’s going on?”

As she reached for him, he stepped back,

looking sharply at her. "We can't, Millie." He wanted to hold her again but feared he might not be able to pull away next time. He wasn't good enough for her and that was all there was to it. If making sure she landed a better man hurt him, it would just have to be. If it upset her, she would get over it soon enough, he was sure. After all, it was for her own good.

Confused, Millie stared at him a moment and then tears welled in her eyes. She had been a fool. She had even kissed him and allowed him to pull her close. "Well, I almost fell for it, didn't I?" She was hurt but angry also.

"Fell for what?" Luke was genuinely confused.

Biting back on the tears, she balled her hands into fists at her sides, forcing control over herself. Through gritted teeth, she sneered, "I was a fool! You've been using me all this time just to get to my father, you pig!" She spun on her heel and walked to the front door and flung it open wide, pointing outside.

“Leave now and never come back.”

Shaking his head, Luke stood where he was. “No, Millie, listen. I wasn’t using you to get to your father.”

“Please,” she overrode him, “take yourself off my property. I can’t believe I was stupid enough to ever trust you.” She wanted to scream at him for being so cruel. She vowed to never trust another man as easily as she had trusted Luke with his sexy swagger and his deep blue-gray eyes. She presumed his handsome appearance had played a part in her being so quickly taken in by him.

Stepping toward her, Luke held out a hand. She batted it away and stood her ground, shoulders squared, chin high. “Get out!” She was on the verge of screaming.

“But you don’t understand—”

“And I never will. You got what you wanted from me and now you have no use for

me. That much I understand perfectly. Something else I understand is that I'll never forgive you for being every bit as underhanded as any outlaw you ever hunted." Feeling the tears prickle again, she glared fiercely at Luke. "My father and I don't need your help, your kindness, your supposed *charity*. Now I see that we never did. Do us a favor and disappear; leave us to our own fates. I'm sure they will be better than being double-crossed by the likes of you. If you take him in, I hope that reward money brings you nothing but grief, just as you've brought me." She stabbed her finger in the direction of the doorway again, unable to say anymore without crying.

Seeing that he was getting nowhere with her, he dropped his gaze and stepped to the porch. He turned to try explaining his actions one final time when she promptly slammed the door in his face. Air whooshed past his face with such force that his short hair rippled. Stunned by the ferocity of her anger, Luke was loath to leave. He raised his hand to knock on the door but thought better of it. She was angry enough that it wouldn't surprise him if she answered his knock with the rifle.

He waited for a while, listening, hoping she would come to the door and allow him to explain himself. *Maybe she just needs a few minutes to calm down*, he thought. After several moments, he heard nothing from inside. No screaming fit—as he had heard from other women, women unlike Millie. There was also no sobbing as he had also seen and heard other women do after an argument with their men. Millie was completely unlike any woman he had ever known.

With no other choice, he mounted Chester and rode back toward Haven Ridge.



# Chapter Fifteen

Feeling lower than a snake's belly, Luke rode slowly toward town. He held an internal argument about his feelings for Millie and what was best for her. He had not meant to hurt her by pulling away and telling her they couldn't continue, but she refused to hear him out. *How am I supposed to make her understand that it was for her own good if she won't even listen to me?*

As Haven Ridge came into view, he decided that perhaps it wasn't meant for him to explain it to her; maybe it was best just to leave it be and let it work itself out. Never having let his feelings out before, let alone explained them to anyone, Luke thought the act might only serve to make him want her more.

The pain in his heart was bad enough. He did not need to add any extra to it.



With Millie's words still stinging his heart and mind, he watched glumly as Sheriff Roach rode toward him. Stopping just shy of the town, he waited. The sheriff needed to know that Millie had revealed the location of her father's hideout.

"I've got some bad news, Luke." The sheriff leaned over his saddle horn and pushed his hat back from his brow.

*That's exactly what I need right now, more bad news,* he thought and sighed. "How bad?" The evening had taken hold and the world around him seemed peaceful in the muted orange glow of the westering sun. His insides were anything but peaceful and he knew his inner turmoil was about to get worse; the look on the sheriff's face assured him of it.

"Jacob Conley has been very badly injured. His ranch was hit by outlaws earlier. The doc is with him now, says he'll recover, but he's in pretty bad shape for the time." Harvey didn't think it was possible for Luke to look more forlorn, and he wondered what had

doused the young man's fire.

“Why did outlaws hit Conley's ranch?” Luke knew there was hardly ever a good reason, but in this case, outlaws would have to pass other, more prosperous ranches to get to Jacob's. It seemed targeted, personal perhaps.

“That's just it,” Harvey shook his head and continued, “I don't think it was just any outlaws. I think it was Deacon's men. But you'll never get Jacob to admit that. He said it was outlaws and his family and workers are standing behind that story, too. They're terrified.” He motioned for Luke to follow him and headed back toward the jail station at a slow walk.

“Was Deacon sending some kind of warning to Jacob? Was he afraid Jacob might tell the truth about Samuel's death?” That was the only viable answer in Luke's mind.

“Yep. Somebody probably told Deacon that Jacob talked to me again. I ran into him early this morning between his place and

town; we had a long discussion about that night at The Saloon, but he stuck to his original story. He acted sympathetically and like he wanted to tell me something but just wouldn't do it." Harvey shook his head.

"Well, if Deacon threatened him and his family, Jacob won't change his story. He'll do whatever it takes to protect his family and I can't say I blame him." He tethered Chester outside the jail and followed the sheriff inside.

"I was going to try to talk to him again tomorrow, see what it would take to get him to 'fess up to the truth, but I guess now..." Harvey shrugged. "Don't guess any amount of promises and talking would get him to change his story."

Luke shook his head. "You're probably right." He sat on a chair, noting the heavy feeling in his body. He was tired, mentally and physically. "I talked to Mary Preston today."

Harvey pulled his hat off and shot Luke a hot look. "I thought we agreed that we'd give

her more time. That poor woman has been through enough. What in the Sam Hell were you thinking, Luke?" That Mary had been so rudely imposed upon riled Harvey.

"Well, I was thinking that after my own run-in with Deacon, I needed answers and I needed them fast. Millie's safety is on the line."

"Wait, what kind of run-in? How's Millie in danger?" Harvey swiftly let the subject of Mary drop in lieu of the new information.

Luke quickly recounted his meeting with Deacon and the offers the man made to him. Then he told him what Mary had revealed about Samuel and the likely reason he had been murdered. "Millie doesn't know about my meeting with Deacon, but I did tell her what I learned from Mrs. Preston."

"Good, I wouldn't recommend telling her about it. Not yet, anyway. The more information we keep between us, the safer everyone is. Of course, what Deacon did was

bordering on interfering with the investigation, impeding justice. If you were a deputy, I'd run Deacon in on those charges." Harvey fought to remain calm, at least in appearance. That Deacon had implied harm to Millie boiled his blood. The man had no morals, no standards, no code at all. That made him very dangerous.

Twirling his hat between his hands as he leaned forward, Luke decided it would be best to tell the sheriff about Isaac's hideout. "Since we're getting everything out in the open here, I need to tell you something that Millie told me just a few minutes ago." His heart lurched when he spoke her name.

He told the sheriff about Wilma's Wandering, leaving out the part where Millie had kissed him. If Millie ever wanted anyone to know about that, she would have to be the one to tell it. As far as Luke was concerned, it was a personal incident that he would hold close to his heart forever.

Tapping the desk with his knuckles,

Harvey thought about the ravine. He thought he knew where it was. "If we go ahead and bring Isaac in safely, we don't stand much of a chance of keeping him safe until the circuit judge gets here."

"No, Deacon's men will find out and have a mob out to string him up in no time, I'm sure." Luke tapped his boot heel against the wooden floor. He hated indecision and now his life seemed full of indecision.

Harvey nodded. "And, even if he does get a fair trial, with no witnesses willing to speak up about the truth of the matter, Isaac will hang for the murder anyway." Groaning, he sat back in his seat and looked out the window to the west. Toward the Thomas homestead, but his mind was following the route to the ravine farther out. "What do you think? What comes next?" He was always willing to hear out someone else's ideas about tough situations, and he took Luke to be a thinker, a man who was used to thinking around the situation, figuring ways out of things that seemed impossible to others.

“Just to be honest, I’m not sure what to do. After a drink and some rest, maybe I can come up with a plan that would work best for everyone. Right now, I’m at a loss.” Elbows on knees, Luke bent to rest his head on his steepled fingers. He didn’t tell the sheriff that he couldn’t get past the way Millie had tossed him out, past the hurtful things she had said to him, or the feeling that he was completely useless as a man.

“Honesty. I like that about you, Luke. Most men would have made something up just then to make them sound like they had it all worked out. You don’t put on airs at all, do you?” Harvey grinned and watched Luke closely. Something was really eating at the man, but he couldn’t tell what it was.

“No, sir. I don’t see any use in putting on airs. I’m just me and I don’t always have the answers. No need acting otherwise.”

“I feel the same way. I do have an idea, though. It just occurred to me and it might not be the best thing for everyone, but at least

Isaac would live.”

Luke straightened up. “I’m listening.”

“Maybe it’s high time to offer to help Isaac disappear for good. Help get him safely out of Colorado so he can start a life somewhere else. Start fresh where no one knew him. After the dust settles here, Millie could always join him, if that’s what she wants to do.”

*So, that’s how this ends,* he thought sadly. Their lives intertwined for a brief time and it would soon end with her leaving the state to join her father and start over fresh. He nodded. That would be the best for the Thomases. Millie would likely find a husband in no time once that happened. He nodded again.

“So? Does that mean you agree?” Harvey picked up his hat. It was getting to be suppertime and he was ready to eat. It had been a long day and he hadn’t taken time to eat since breakfast.



“I agree, Sheriff. That would be the safest for Millie and Isaac, for sure.” He wanted to add that it would not be what was best for him or his heart but did not. In the end, he forced a small smile and stood. “I think I’ll head over to The Saloon and have a drink or two. Lots to think about tonight.” He put his hat on.

“See you tomorrow, then.” Harvey raised a hand in parting as Luke walked out. He remained at the desk for only a short time after Luke’s departure, wondering about his plan for Isaac. With his belly rumbling, he gave up for the evening and headed toward home, which was just at the end of town, and the block of cheese and hard bread that were waiting for him.

Back on the Thomas homestead, Millie was having a rather bad time trying to get hold of herself. Not only was she angry at Luke for duping her, but she was also angry at herself for being blind enough to actually trust him.

She tried to distract herself with menial chores, but nothing seemed to be working. Luke now had the location of her father's hiding place. He could do with that information as he pleased. She cried, hoping he had a shred of decency in him that would sway him to leave her father alone. But with such a large reward, she doubted that would happen.

Frantic, she moved about the house starting chores and then leaving them unfinished only to start another. Finally, she came to the decision that she should ride out to Wilma's Wandering and try to stop Luke. If she couldn't dissuade him, maybe she could give her father a head start on getting away. He could flee the state, go as far as he needed to start over and be safe.

Drying her tears, she went to the barn and saddled Brandywine. She stopped at the house long enough to get her rifle and then continued on to the midpoint, where the paths diverged. To get to Wilma's Wandering, she would deviate off the path and head back

toward the homestead on a more northerly mountain path. Once past her property, that path led in a twisting path out to flat land again and it ran for a few miles straight west.

She rode Brandywine hard all the way to the midpoint and actually started onto the mountain path before she stopped. What if she ran into Deacon's men? What if she didn't, but they saw her and followed her? She would lead them straight to her father. If he was sick or weak, they could easily overtake her and her father. He wouldn't see a fair trial then, for sure.

Looking back toward Haven Ridge, she was torn. She had no way of knowing if anyone would see her, or if they were already headed in the direction of the ravine. He might be safe out there, and in her haste, she could ruin that. She would never forgive herself if she did that.

If she ran into Deacon's men out on the trail by herself, they could do whatever they wanted to her. She might be able to fend off

one or two with the rifle, but she held no illusion that she could fight off more than that. And Deacon's men were like wild dogs—they always seemed to travel in packs.

Screaming at the heavens in frustration, she turned Brandywine back toward home. By the time she reached the barn, she was weary beyond tired and moved sluggishly as she unsaddled Brandywine. She plopped onto a bale of hay and stared out at the house. It seemed miles away to her tired body and she dreaded moving.

Dragging herself into the house again, she propped the rifle by the fireplace and stretched out on the sofa without bothering to take off her shoes. The situation seemed hopeless. Her future had never looked bleaker. She wanted to sleep for days and forget for a while that anything bad was happening in her life.

If only she could see her father, warn him somehow that he was in serious danger, she thought she might be able to fall asleep. As it

was, she lay staring at the cold fireplace, unable to close her eyes and relax. She had been as foolish as a child to trust Luke Houston. She wouldn't make the same mistake ever again. If she ever thought about trusting another man, she would resist the urge. No matter how good a person he seemed to be.

Apparently, her skills at reading a man's character and mannerisms were severely lacking. Her mother would not have been proud of how this situation turned out.



# Chapter Sixteen

Inside The Saloon, Luke took a seat on the far side of the bar, away from the other patrons. He was in no mood to hold conversations, no matter the subject. Ushering Clyde to him, he ordered.

“A beer, three shots, and a bowl of beans.” He removed his hat and set it on the stool beside him, only sparing Clyde a quick glance.

“We got stew with meat, taters, carrots, and celery tonight. Sure you don’t want that?” Clyde grinned his crooked grin.

“Nope. Just beans will do tonight.” The stew would pale in comparison to Millie’s, he was sure. And, every bite would remind him of being in her kitchen, eating with her, laughing with her. No, he couldn’t stand that.

“Alrighty. Up to you, partner.” Clyde

returned with the drinks and then left again, returning with the bowl of beans. “Anything else?” The young man looked despondent as if he had just lost his best friend. Being new to town, Clyde wondered what would have made such a change in Luke’s demeanor.

Luke shook his head. He killed the shots and chased them with the beer, hoping the calming effects would kick in fast. The first bite of beans filled his mouth with blandness, and he thought, *A man never gets used to this.*

Leaving Luke to himself for the time, Clyde thought it might not be the best time to try and talk to the man. Besides, Deacon’s men were in the bar and getting louder by the minute. If one of them spotted him having a serious conversation with Luke, they would have questions that he didn’t want to answer.

Luke chewed unenthusiastically, recalling the savory taste of Millie’s stew. He couldn’t figure out why he had frozen up when she started to kiss him the second time. Their first kiss had felt as if it was the natural thing to



do, but not the second one.

Pushing the beans around dejectedly, he wondered if he should just walk away, disappear in the middle of the night and wash his hands of Millie and Isaac. No matter how he turned it over in his mind, the fight seemed unwinnable. He was at a complete loss as to what to do.

Forcing himself to finish half the beans, he replayed her harsh words in his mind. They stung, but the worst thing was the expression on her face, the downtrodden, brokenhearted expression that would haunt him for a long time to come.

*I'd give anything to be able to go back in time and do things over. Do things better,* he thought. But he knew there was no way she would trust him now. There was definitely no silver lining in the cloud that he could see.

Clyde bantered loudly with a couple of the men on the other side of the bar, but he kept walking toward Luke as if he wanted to say

something only to turn away at the last moment. This went on for the better part of the twenty minutes it took Luke to finish his beer. Something was definitely on the old barkeep's mind.

There was still a case to be solved, an innocent man to be helped, and a town that needed to be freed from a tyrant. The least he could do was try to get any information he could and hand it over to the sheriff. Even if he decided to leave off, he could help that much. Clyde's actions had raised his curiosity, besides.

The two men Clyde had been joking around with left the bar and headed over to a poker table, where they sat with their backs to the bar. The two men were part of Deacon's crew, but he couldn't recall their names. Luke called him over to order another drink, although he really didn't want another. It was a good excuse to find out what was on his mind.

"I'll have another beer, Clyde." Luke

forced a smile.

“You got it.” Clyde pulled another glassful for him and set it on the bar. He looked over his shoulder and back to Luke. He wanted to talk to him about Jacob but was unsure if he should do it at the bar with Deacon’s men still present. They were playing cards and were probably drunk enough not to be watching him, but with Deacon’s men, he could never be sure.

“Something on your mind, Clyde?” Luke kept his voice low, noting how Clyde kept stealing glances at the other people in the tavern.

Nodding, Clyde took the towel from his shoulder and wiped at the bar a ways down from where Luke sat. “I do have something on my mind, matter of fact. I got wind of what happened to Jacob Conley earlier.” He pursed his lips and scowled down at the bar, rubbing harder.

“Yeah. Real shame, that.” Hope welled up

in Luke's chest. Although Clyde was on Deacon's payroll or at least worked for the man enough for people to think it, he seemed to be having trouble with his conscience.

"Shame ain't the word for it." Clyde moved closer. "You know, I was one of the first residents here. I remember when a man could come out here and be free to build a life on his own terms." He glanced over his shoulder; no one was watching him. "That was the times before Deacon came. Haven Ridge was a good place; small and without much in the way of progress such as businesses and what have you, but still, it was a good place. There was peace, the folks around here weren't afraid and there was honor. Men held their heads high. They were proud of their town."

"Sounds real nice, Clyde, but what's that got to do with Jacob?" Luke felt Clyde's apprehension, so he urged him on. It was like urging a reluctant horse into a gallop.

Moving directly in front of Luke, Clyde

squared his shoulders and ran a hand through his shaggy, graying hair. His bushy eyebrows drew down. "It ain't right what happened to Jacob and his family. It's the last straw far as I'm concerned. If somebody don't stand up to Deacon, things are just gonna get worse."

Nodding, Luke agreed. "You're right. But so far, I've not met a single person willing to do that." Luke shrugged and looked pointedly at the other patrons. "No one here will do it. Everyone is either too scared, too dumb, or they're in with Deacon so deep they couldn't get out even if they wanted to." He didn't like talking about the people of Haven Ridge so harshly, but he thought it was time to really put the spurs to Clyde and see if he would gallop in the right direction.

The barkeep looked crestfallen as he followed Luke's gaze around the room. "I built this business with my own two hands. It's all I got in this world. I'm ashamed to admit that I accepted help from that lowlife, but I did. Don't think he didn't make me pay for it tenfold over the years, either, because he did." Thinking back over the things he had done for

Deacon as repayment for his debt made him sick to his stomach and ashamed.

Clyde blew air between his lips and put his hands on his hips. The bags under his eyes were testament that he had not been sleeping well.

In Luke's experience, men who didn't sleep very well were usually wrestling with their conscience. Clyde was no exception. His grizzled appearance was justified if he had been dealing with Deacon and hiding what Luke thought he had been.

"When you deal with animals, you're liable to get their fleas, if you take my meaning." Luke took a sip of his beer. He wanted to remain clear-headed enough to take in all that Clyde might tell him.

"Mr. Houston, I'm tired. Bone weary from carrying all this around with me. I done wrong in the past, God knows, but I can't do it anymore." Taking a final look and seeing that no one seemed to be paying any attention to

his conversation with the bounty hunter, Clyde leaned both hands on the bar and spoke low. "I'm ashamed of doing Deacon's bidding all these years. I've more than repaid my debt to him and I've been scared to do the right thing for too long. After what he done to Jacob, I'm ready to put that fear behind me and do the right thing. Are you the man to talk to about it?" He eyed the bounty hunter's lean face and knew he was.

"Clyde," Luke smiled and continued, "I'm glad you asked. Me and the sheriff are the right men to talk to. I don't know who else we can trust, but if you're willing to talk to us, we will definitely put the information to good use." He stuck his hand out and shook with the aging barkeep, a new respect budding for the man. "Give me time to find Sheriff Roach and then you meet us later, say, at Maisy's?"

Considering it, Clyde looked down at the floor. "Maisy's is a mite risky. Those walls are thin, and Deacon has many ears." He raised his eyebrows. "How about midnight at the schoolhouse? No one is ever there at night and it's far enough away from town that we won't

be seen. And the sheriff is probably at home. Just follow the road past the jail station and he will be at the end on the right. Small house, can't miss it." Nodding, he turned back to the other side of his bar, the bar that he loved and called home. It had been many years since he had been able to hold his head high and act like a proud businessman. Deacon had been his savior in a time of need and his downfall afterward. It seemed he had been on the downhill side for most of his life now. It was time to start the climb back to being respectable, even if it was seen only in his mirror.

Dropping the coins to pay for his meal and drinks and Clyde turned to him. Luke nodded and took another look at Clyde to make certain there was no trap intended, no deceit on the man's part. Clyde moved to swipe the coins from the bar and clear the glasses and bowl away.

He admitted to working for Deacon and Luke was fresh out of trust for anyone other than the sheriff and Millie. Hoping that what he saw in Clyde's eyes was genuine resolve to



do the right thing, Lude nodded again, more certain.

“Midnight at the schoolhouse. We’ll see you there.” He took his hat from the stool and left without looking back.

Clyde’s heart hammered as he dropped the coins into his pocket. By midnight, Deacon’s men would be passed out in a corner or long gone from The Saloon. That was their normal behavior and he saw no reason for them to do otherwise. They were already headed in the right direction.

He hoped that when it was all over that he would still have his saloon. He was too old to be working at manual labor like the sawmill offered or working as a cowpoke. The Saloon was all he had. He had no wife, no children, no family. He had been married once, a lifetime ago, but she had not lasted long in Haven Ridge. He couldn’t fault her for leaving, though. The place had been nothing like they had thought when they moved there. The last time he saw her, she was in a coach headed

back east. If he had been smart, he would have gone with her.

The jail station was dark. Luke rode to the end of town and, just as Clyde had said, there was a small, neat house on the right side. He tethered Chester and stepped onto the porch, raising his hand to knock when the door swung inward.

Sheriff Roach poked his head out and looked behind Luke. "Is everything all right? What are you doing here?" His eyes were suspicious.

"Clyde told me where you live. He wants to meet us at the schoolhouse at midnight. Says he's got something to share with us to help us put this thing right."

Moving aside, the sheriff motioned him inside. "Midnight's a ways off yet, better come in and I'll brew some coffee. It might be a long night."

Chuckling, Luke stepped inside the modest home. "It might be." That seemed to be about normal for him, though. One day dragging along and melting into the next, no sleep in between for him. It reached a point that he didn't much bother about keeping days straight in his mind, he just went on until he physically couldn't carry on any longer, and then he would sleep a little while. He took the seat Harvey offered him in the kitchen.

"Did old Clyde have a change of heart? His conscience get the better of him?" Harvey started the coffee and joined Luke at the table. Normally, he didn't have guests but found that Luke's presence didn't seem to put him on edge as happened with other people.

"He said what happened to Jacob was the last straw and he was ready to do the right thing. That's all I know." The coffee smelled good and Luke thought it would help kill the effects of the alcohol he had consumed. "Can we trust him, you reckon?"

The sheriff rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. Clyde’s been here a long time and he has a lot to lose if he gets on Deacon’s bad side. But a man’s conscience is a mighty powerful thing. If his is bothering him, that’s a good sign.”

“He looks bad like he’s not been sleeping. Didn’t want anyone to notice we were having a conversation and kept his voice low enough that nobody could hear. I say he’s on the level about it.” Luke hoped his instincts had not been dulled by his drinking or by the argument with Millie. Clouded judgment could get a man killed in his line of work.

“Guess there’s only one way to find out.” Harvey grinned.

Luke nodded. “Guess so.” He wished it would be so easy to figure out women and love. That part of his day was still a tangle of emotions that he couldn’t get through. There seemed to be no way out that didn’t end with him feeling worse about himself than he already did. That was a place he didn’t care to go anytime soon; where he was held enough

negativity to last him a lifetime.



# Chapter Seventeen

Luke and the sheriff arrived at the schoolhouse early and inspected the grounds. The schoolhouse sat off in a field by itself with only a few trees scattered around for shade where the kids could play at recess. The building was empty and the door unlocked. There was no sign of anyone on the grounds or inside.

“Just to be on the safe side, we should put the horses out back at that small stand of trees.” Sheriff Roach dismounted and tethered his horse.

Walking farther away, he leaned against a tree where he would have a good view of anyone approaching from either direction. Like Luke, he hoped Clyde was being truthful, but he refused to place too much trust in anyone who had worked for Deacon for so many years.

Luke stood at a nearby tree, keeping an eye to their backs. The field was large, and it would be easy for someone to sneak up on them. “As the crow flies, Deacon’s ranch isn’t far past this field, Sheriff.”

“Yep. Not much between us and his place except that rise and the hills there.” He pointed where Luke had already been looking.

At exactly midnight, Luke whistled low to get the sheriff’s attention. There was a lone man approaching on foot from the middle of town. In the darkness, it was impossible to tell who it was until he was much closer.

They remained still and quiet, allowing the man to approach the schoolyard. Luke saw that it was Clyde. He walked quietly to the door of the school and pushed it open, sticking his head inside.

Luke heard him say something into the empty building before stepping back outside, closing the door silently. Stepping to the side of the building, Clyde called low, “You out



here?”

Luke stepped from his tree. Clyde jumped when he caught sight of him.

“Right here, Clyde.” Luke approached him, carefully scanning the darkness beyond him and the darker shadows. “You alone?” Luke held his rifle by his side much the same as Millie had done on their first meeting.

“Well, who else am I gonna bring with me? Of course, I’m alone. Where’s the sheriff?” Clyde looked around nervously.

“Right here, Clyde.” Sheriff Roach stepped from the deep shadow cast by the schoolhouse. “Just making sure you’re on the level.”

“Dang, boys, I am, all right? Can we go inside now? I don’t want any nosy body seeing me out here with you two and stirring up trouble before it’s time.” Clyde stomped toward the door and disappeared inside.

The sheriff nodded to Luke. "Let's go see what he's got to say. I think it's safe. We'll be able to see if anyone comes this way."

"Got it." Luke followed him inside and closed the door. He took one look at the layout and pointed to the window looking over the front yard. "You two sit where you can see that way; I'll sit over here so I can see that field."

Clyde huffed. "There ain't nobody coming, I told you!" He didn't like it, but he moved and sat where Luke indicated. His heart felt like it was going to explode; it was beating so hard and fast. He wanted to get it over with. Doing the right thing was scary, even for an old man like him.

"We're all set now. Clyde, Luke here tells me you got something you want to get off your chest. Let's hear it."

"If this gets back to Deacon, I'm a dead

man. You got to know that up front, Sheriff. I'm an old man and I ain't long for this world anyway, but I don't want my days snuffed out by the likes of him either." Clyde arched sweat from his face.

"Deacon won't learn a thing from us. Strictly confidential," Harvey tried to reassure him.

"All right. It's about the night Samuel got killed. When you left out to go fetch Miss Millie, old Isaac and Samuel threw a few punches at each other but it broke up on its own and pretty fast because Isaac was dog drunk by then. Man could hardly stand without holding onto something. Sam didn't hold no grief toward him, just shook his head and started to walk away. That's when Carson Morgan put a gun to his head. The place cleared out quick. All the girls ran upstairs and the few men sitting around hightailed it outside."

Luke asked, "There were others who saw Carson put the gun to Samuel's head?" His

tone was incredulous.

“Yeah. Ain’t none of them stupid enough to cross Carson, though. He’s crazy. He took Sam’s gun and shot him in the chest, right there, without a word. He dropped the gun on the floor and hollered at his men. Isaac had passed out by that time, but Carson’s men dragged him outside and they all waited for you to get back. You know what happened from there.”

Harvey’s gut tightened. “You knew this all along and helped them cover it up?” The anger he felt leaked into his words.

“I told you, if Deacon or his men find out I told you the truth, they’ll kill me. Why do you think I didn’t say nothing before? No man fancies the idea of being murdered. It’s easier to keep your mouth shut and live.” The sheriff made him feel lowly and cowardly. He supposed he was, but he hated feeling that way. “I’m tired of feeling like I’m less than everybody else around here, Sheriff. I been here longer than almost anybody else. I’ve

done some bad things, but I want to set them right. I'm tired of being afraid and being a coward." He armed sweat again and fought off nausea. "What happened to Jacob will happen to a lot more people if somebody don't stop Deacon Owens."

Harvey pulled back on his anger toward Clyde. The man really seemed to want to do right, even if it was a bit late.

Seeing that the sheriff was struggling with his anger, Luke spoke up. "Would you be willing to sign a statement about the truth of that night? If not, your word's useless and an innocent man will hang. All the hard evidence points to Isaac being the murderer."

"I'll do whatever I have to. If I sign that statement, Carson will hang, and Deacon will come after me." Clyde sighed defeatedly. He had known it might come down to him having to testify against Carson. The dread built up inside him and he nearly told them he wouldn't do it. The thought of another innocent and young family being attacked by

Deacon's men stopped him.

Harvey slammed his hand on the desktop in frustration. "Carson will hang for the murder certainly, but that means Deacon gets to walk away unscathed."

"It ain't right. Carson killed Samuel by Deacon's order, I'm sure of it." Clyde's voice was steady, and he was glad because he was scared. More scared than he could ever remember being in his life.

Luke said, "Hard evidence. If we don't have it, Carson hangs, Deacon walks free."

"But it'll save Isaac, right?" Clyde had no idea where or how to get hard evidence against Deacon.

Harvey nodded. "Yeah, Isaac won't hang for murder."

The room fell silent as all three men slid

into their own thoughts.

Harvey was the first to break the silence. "I've got it. I know how we can get the evidence against Deacon. When the circuit judge gets here, I'll talk to him about offering Carson a reduced sentence, maybe life in prison, in exchange for his testimony against Deacon."

Clyde shook his head vehemently. "Carson wouldn't ever testify against Deacon. That won't work. He's Deacon's most loyal man. You ought to know that, Sheriff."

"I'm not from here, but I've had dealings with men like Deacon. He might be powerful, and people might be afraid of him. But, if there's one thing I know for sure, knowing you're going to hang has a real funny way of flipping a man's loyalties. To save his own life, Carson will testify against Deacon." Luke didn't turn from the window. He wouldn't allow himself the luxury of getting comfortable or trusting that they were completely safe.

Harvey barked a short laugh. "He's right, Clyde. When he's faced with the certainty that he will hang, Carson will sing like a bird. I've seen it before, too." Harvey stood and stuck out his hand to Clyde. They shook. "I'll draw up the account you gave me tonight and you can read over it, sign it tomorrow. Thank you. You're a good man, Clyde."

Clyde smiled. "Just make sure they all get what they deserve, Sheriff. If you say your plan will work, I'll do whatever it takes to help you."

Luke moved from the window and shook Clyde's hand, too. "Go back to The Saloon or home and watch your back until this is all over with."

Feeling lighter since he had unburdened his conscience, Clyde left the schoolhouse and headed home, which was a room attached to the back of The Saloon. When he had told Luke the bar was all he had in the world, he had meant it.



With Clyde gone back into the shadows, Luke turned to the sheriff. "You reckon Carson will do it?"

"I'm sure of it. Even crazy men have a sense of self-preservation that trumps loyalty any day." They headed for their horses. "Follow me back to the jail station. There's something I want to do."

"It's a little late for work, ain't it?" Luke laughed. He thought it was safe enough to let his guard down a little since the meeting was over and since they had enough to put Deacon and his right-hand man away for life.

"This won't take long and it'll go a long way in helping us if this goes down the way I think." Harvey wanted to make sure everything was in order and that he and Luke were above reproach when all was said and done.

Knowing that he was helping get a town

out from under the thumb of an evil man, and save an innocent one from hanging, put Luke in a better mood. As he followed Sheriff Roach back to the jail, he let his mind wander the familiar path back to his and Millie's last meeting. If he could figure out how to prove he only wanted what was best for her, he thought he might be happy for a change.

Not being familiar with emotional relationships, Luke was still at a loss as to how he could prove himself to Millie. He suspected she might never give him the chance considering how hurt and angry she was.

Following the sheriff into the jail station, Luke removed his hat and stood just inside the doorway. Sheriff Roach opened a drawer on his desk, palmed an item, and motioned Luke forward.

"Luke, if given the chance, would you want to finish this job as a deputy, with all the powers and protection of the station of sheriff?" Harvey smiled.

Luke's eyes went to the item in Harvey's hand. The silver glinted faintly from the points on the star. He nodded. "Yes, sir. I would."

"That means that you should waive your right to the reward money for bringing in Isaac Thomas. Do you?"

Again, he nodded. "I didn't want the money, anyway. I just wanted to make sure an innocent man wasn't wrongly accused and hung, Sheriff."

"I have to hear you say it." Harvey flipped the deputy's star over in his hand.

"I waive my right to the bounty money on Isaac Thomas' head." Luke stood a little straighter and pulled his shoulders back.

Harvey pinned the star to Luke's shirt just under his jacket. "I hereby deputize you, Luke Houston." He stepped back and patted Luke's shoulder. "You are now a lawman."

Luke eyed the tin star feeling a sense of pride that he had never known before. “For how long?”

“I’d be happy keeping you on as a deputy from now on, but ultimately, that will be up to you. I want to make sure that you are legal if this case takes a turn and you have to use force to detain any of Deacon’s men, or to protect Isaac. Thought it was best if we didn’t make a big deal out of it or let a bunch of people see me pinning that star on your chest.”

“Yeah, the fewer who know for now, the better, I guess.” The thought of being a lawman had never really crossed Luke’s mind, but just having that star on his chest for a few minutes had already changed the way he was thinking about the case, and about Haven Ridge.

Harvey noted the way Luke stared at the star and the way he had stood a bit taller, a bit prouder with it on his shirt. “Kinda changes

your perspective about things, doesn't it?" He chuckled, remembering when he had first been deputized years earlier in another county. It seemed a lifetime ago.

"Yeah, it does." Luke let his jacket fall over the star, but its rigid outline pressed against his chest and served as a reminder of its presence, and for what it stood for. Law and order, peace and protection.

Luke shook hands with the sheriff. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*, Deputy." Harvey moved to the door. "I know it's late, but I really think we shouldn't waste any more time. Millie deserves to know what's going on. She's been through a lot, worrying about her father has taken a toll on her. She's strong, but I'm sure some of it is only an act. Any person can only take so much stress, no matter how strong they are."

Luke's heart skipped a beat at the mention of visiting Millie. *What if she refuses to let us in*

*because she's still mad at me? It's too soon. She still needs time to cool down,* he thought.

“But it’s going on one in the morning, Sheriff. She’ll surely be in bed by now.” Normally, Luke did not like to delay, but it filled him with an odd mixture of fear and hurt to think about facing her again so soon.

Harvey turned to Luke questioningly, not caring for the distressed tone of his voice. He scrutinized Luke’s expression. “That might be true, but my guess is that she isn’t sleeping much these days. She’s smart enough to know that Deacon could send his men around again at any time.” He opened the door. “We need to let her know what’s going on *and* make sure she’s safe—especially after Clyde came forward tonight. My trust that he’ll stand by his word only goes so far.”

Luke scuffed his boot against the floor. The sheriff was right. If Deacon’s men became suspicious and started questioning Clyde, he would surely cave and that would put Millie in danger. “You’re right.” Setting his resolve to

put his personal feelings away, Luke went out and mounted up.





# Chapter Eighteen

Under cover of darkness, Luke and Harvey rode toward the Thomas homestead. The trek had become familiar to Luke. Until the last time he had left Millie's home, the path had also become synonymous with impending comfort and happiness with a sense of coming home. Now it was only a painful reminder of his unrequited longing for a woman he could never have, a life that he could never live.

The moon was high in the cloudless sky, touching everything below with silvery highlights. At the edge of the property, they slowed their horses to a walk and scanned for any movement outside the house. There was none and the only sounds were the occasional nocturnal stirrings of the livestock and the lonesome hoots of an owl in the distance.

Lanterns flickered dimly inside the house behind the closed curtains of the living room and kitchen. Luke wondered if Millie was still awake at such a late hour and if it was

because of their misunderstanding earlier or because she was afraid. More likely, he thought it was a mixture of the two.

Chester whickered as Luke dismounted. The horse was undoubtedly tired, and Luke patted his neck as he tethered him in front of the porch beside the sheriff's horse. He looked around, again wondering if domestic life would ever be in his future.

"I say we stay here for the remainder of the night. If Miss Thomas is inclined to allow it." Harvey spoke quietly and stroked his horse absently.

Luke nodded, hiding the fact that he thought it was a bad idea. He thought they would be lucky if she didn't run them off before hearing them out.

The temperature had dropped, and the air had cooled him on his ride, but as he walked toward the porch behind the sheriff, his heart pounding, Luke became uncomfortably warm again. He thought it had to do with his

tormented feelings for Millie. He was unaccustomed to the edginess of his normally steady nerves.

Before the sheriff could knock, the curtains over the living room window parted and the barrel of a rifle appeared on the other side of the glass. Millie stood in silhouette, peering out at them.

Raising a hand in greeting, the sheriff said, "It's Sheriff Roach and Luke Houston, Miss Thomas." She was alert to the fact that she was in danger, that was good. She had obviously not been sleeping, at the late hour, that was bad. She was stressed and it would begin wearing her down physically.

Squinting against the darkness, Millie leaned closer to the window and saw that Luke was indeed standing behind the sheriff. He was the last person she had thought to see in the middle of the night. He was the last person she had *wanted* to see. "It's very late, Sheriff." She couldn't hide the agitation in her voice.

“And, I’m very sorry to disturb you, but there’s been a development with the case, and we thought you should know right away. May we please come inside?” Harvey couldn’t blame her for being on high alert, but he also wished she would lower the rifle.

After a long pause, she moved the rifle, letting the curtain fall back into place. Propping the gun by the fireplace, she turned to the door, her insides quivering. Luke’s betrayal had torn at her heart and mind all evening. She had known he was a bounty hunter and therefore should have known not to trust him, but her heart had gotten in the way. It had filled her head with fanciful daydreams of a life that she now knew was impossible to achieve. At least with Luke. As far as she was concerned, he was still not to be trusted, no matter who he accompanied to her house.

Straightening her dress and then her hair, she walked to the door. Breathing deeply, she willed her runaway pulse to slow before she allowed the men to enter. She unlocked the

door with shaking hands and pulled it open. The sheriff opened the screen door, smiling, and stepped inside.

“Thank you.” He removed his hat and continued toward the living room with happiness lightening his steps. It was rare to deliver good news during such a situation, but when it happened, he was always happy. It made his job seem a little less dark and burdensome.

Millie didn't wait for Luke to enter, rather, she shot him a fiery glance of disapproval, promptly turned away, and followed Sheriff Roach into the living room.

Luke's mouth went dry as he closed the door behind him. He opted to stand just inside the living room while the sheriff and Millie moved to the sofa and chair on the other side of the room. He removed his hat and watched as Millie made every effort to act as if he weren't there, keeping her back to him. She didn't sit and didn't offer the sheriff a seat. Her back was ramrod straight and she held her

head high.

The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife. Harvey wondered if the two had had a falling out of some sort.

Millie offered him a drink but didn't offer one to Luke. Politely, he refused, wanting to get on with the business at hand. *If they got their feathers ruffled at one another, they'll have to work it out later*, he thought.

"All right, Sheriff. What brings you out in the middle of the night?" Millie held her hands laced together against her stomach, hoping it was not bad news. She was acutely aware of Luke's eyes on her from behind but was determined not to show him any courtesy. He had hurt her, betrayed her in the worst way, and she didn't want him in her home.

"Your father didn't kill Samuel." Harvey looked toward Luke, wondering why he stood so far away. He nodded for Luke to come on into the room, but he looked away instead and remained by the entrance.

“Well, I told you that already. I knew Papa wasn’t capable of murdering anyone.” Although she had let the doubt creep into her thoughts a few times, she had clung to her hope. It was a relief to hear confirmation from the sheriff that she had been right. “The question has always been whether you could find evidence to that fact or not.”

“That’s where I can help you out, Miss Thomas. Clyde McCormick came to us and told us what really happened that night. He says it was Carson Morgan who killed Samuel. He and his men then put a scene together to frame Isaac. Clyde’s willing to testify to that fact.”

Millie’s expression relaxed momentarily and then she crumpled to the chair by her side. The relief was evident on her face as she covered it with her hands.

Instinctively, Harvey reached for her, thinking she was fainting. When he realized she was not, he backed away. In her exhausted

state, the relief probably took her legs out from under her, he surmised.

Feeling as if she just had the weight of the world lifted from her shoulders, Millie was close to tears. “Thank you, Sheriff. That’s wonderful news!” Her fears about the safety of her father dissolved.

Luke wanted to join the conversation but couldn’t see how to do it without causing her to become upset. He smiled, satisfied for the time being just to watch as the relief washed over her.

Clearing his throat, Harvey cast another look at Luke, who promptly looked to the floor. Turning back to Millie, he sat on the edge of the sofa. He had seen the smile on Luke’s face as he looked at Millie. He could have read that look from a mile away—Luke had feelings for Millie, strong feelings. Figuring that Millie had not been altogether pleasant with the young bounty hunter because of his profession, Harvey thought he might be able to advance his new deputy’s



reputation in Millie's mind. He still wasn't sure how Luke had gotten Isaac's location out of her, but something had happened to put the tension between them. "You know, Luke here has waived his right to the reward money. He's going to be working with me officially to bring Isaac back safely."

Shocked, Millie looked up at the sheriff. Glancing at Luke and then back to the sheriff, she couldn't speak. She opened her mouth to question him, but nothing came out.

Harvey nodded. "It's true." He motioned for Luke to come into the room. "Show her."

With his heart in his throat, Luke took a few steps and stood in the center of the living room facing Millie. He pulled the left side of his jacket back, revealing the deputy's badge on his shirt. He forced a smile for her benefit.

There was pain in Luke's eyes. It was heart-wrenching to see his forced smile and know that she had been the cause of the pain he endured. Millie turned away as tears filled

her eyes. He had been telling the truth the whole time and she had not believed him. She had said horrible things to him, accused him, and had even worse thoughts about him. Ashamed, she remained silent. *He'll never be able to forgive me for being so hateful to him, and I can't blame him!* She swiped at the tears as they began to trickle from her eyes.

Luke dropped his jacket back into place. It wasn't the reaction he had hoped for. Though she tried to hide her tears, he plainly saw her wiping them away. "Miss Thomas, I'm sorry about the misunderstanding earlier." He didn't know what else to say to her. With the sheriff present, he wasn't sure how much he should say.

She nodded but kept her face turned away. He had given up calling her by her first name; that stung, but she thought it was deserved after all she had done to him. She had given him no reason to think it was still okay to call her Millie. Even under such circumstances, he proved to be a gentleman. That stung even worse. It did nothing to make her feel better about herself, either.

Suddenly, Harvey felt like an intruder. There was more going on between the young couple than he had been privy to. Standing, he said, "I think I need to step outside for a while, get some fresh air and think what our next move is going to be, Miss Thomas. So, if you'll excuse me."

She nodded. "Of course. Thank you so much for bringing me this news. You have no idea how grateful I am." Her voice cracked as she turned her watery eyes up to him and then averted her gaze again, humiliated by her tears and lack of control.

"Mighty welcome, Miss." Harvey paused briefly in front of Luke. Without any advice coming to mind, he nodded toward her and then went outside, hoping the two would come to some sort of terms with their personal ordeal. He didn't envy their obvious emotional turmoil. He had been young once and had gone through his fair share of turmoil years ago. He missed the love but had no intentions of trying to have another relationship while he was a lawman—that was no life for a woman

or a family to have to endure.

After the sheriff had stepped out and closed the door, Luke made his way to the end of the sofa nearest Millie and sat nervously. "All I wanted was to bring your father home safely. It was never about the money."

Without looking at him, Millie asked, "That's all you wanted? Just to bring Papa home safe?" *Did he never want me? Did I misread his signals so badly? If he didn't want me, then why did he let me kiss him? Why hold me,* she felt her heart crumple.

Though he had wanted Millie, he thought it best that he didn't tell her. *No need opening that back up,* he thought and sighed. *Everyone can see that I am not the kind of man she deserves. I've already caused her pain and grief without even trying.* "I told you I'd do all I could to help you and your father, and I intend to keep that promise. We'll stay here tonight, if you don't object, to make sure you're safe. This will all be over soon."

*He's harboring hard feelings because of how rude I was to him,* she thought miserably. *I destroyed whatever slim chance I had with him.* She gained control over her emotions, something she had not been able to do when she had run him off and sniffled loudly once. Turning in her seat to face him, she dried her eyes and was glad no more tears welled up. She offered him a smile. "And for that, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. As I said, my father is all the family I have left." She stood. "It's fine if you both want to stay. I have no argument against it." She held her head high and walked toward the kitchen.

Luke stood. "I'll tell the sheriff." He moved to the door and swiftly out it, glad to be in the cool breeze again. That Millie could go from sobbing and seemingly heartbroken to hard as steel in a matter of minutes was confusing. He felt as if he had done something wrong again but didn't know what it could have been.

Harvey turned when Luke stepped outside. "Well, did you two get things straightened out?" He grinned.

“I don’t know what you mean. I just told her we’d stay the night if she didn’t mind. Dawn’s not far off now anyway.” Heat had rushed to Luke’s face and he was glad of the darkness. He didn’t know how the sheriff had known there was anything to work out with Millie, but it was embarrassing that it had been noticeable.

Harvey took his paper and pencil from the saddlebag. “So, you stood in there looking like somebody just shot your dog for no reason, huh?” He walked up to the porch and stood by Luke, still grinning. “Oh, all right. I’ll leave it alone. Just don’t overthink it. It’ll work itself out, I’m sure.”

Luke only stared at him, not offering confirmation or denial. He didn’t think what happened between him and Millie would ever work itself out, nor did he believe the pain in his heart would ever be erased; it would remain even years later.

“Come on, then. I’ll use the time ’til dawn to draw up Clyde’s official statement. We’ll

leave out to find Isaac at first light.” Harvey shook his head and went back inside, leaving Luke to whatever thoughts were plaguing him. The man was unreadable and if he didn’t want to talk about something, he sure knew how to keep quiet.





# Chapter Nineteen

Sheriff Roach came into the kitchen, Luke trailing him like a shadow, and sat down at the table with his paper. Millie had started the coffee and Luke wondered if she would join them. If she did, he hoped that she would soften toward him if only a little. Just enough that she could understand he only wanted to help, only wanted to see her happy.

His question was answered when she set two cups on the table. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go to my room and leave you to your job. If you need me, just give a yell, you won't disturb me. Otherwise, make yourselves at home. There's food on the warming shelf above the stove." She gave them the briefest of smiles and turned toward her room.

Working together, the men got Clyde's statement straight just before dawn. Luke's attention kept drifting to Millie's closed door. He wondered if she might be sleeping, or if

she was in there fuming angry at him still.

They also finished off the coffee and took small portions of the vegetables she had cooked the previous evening.

As the sky started lightening in the east, Harvey looked to his deputy. "Well, are you going to at least let her know we're leaving?"

Luke shook his head. "I think I'll see to the horses. You go ahead and tell her." Luke left before the sheriff could disagree. Millie had made it blatantly clear that she didn't want to speak to him, and he wasn't going to push her.

Harvey tapped lightly on her door and waited for her to respond. He was mildly surprised when she opened the door and looked as if she had been wide awake the entire time. Her bed was still made up, but he could see the indentation where she had been sitting at the head of it.

"Are you leaving to find my father now?"

Her voice was weak, and he knew it was from exhaustion.

“Yes, we are. Thank you for letting us stay and for the coffee and food.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for all you’ve done, Sheriff.” She looked toward the front door and looked disappointed.

“I’m not real good at this sort of thing, Miss—um, Millie, but I feel I should say something.” He fiddled with his hat as he held it with both hands in front of him.

“No, please. Just...I know it’s about me and Luke. It’s okay.” She tried to smile but failed. Her mother should have been the one offering advice, but since that wasn’t an option, she preferred to be left alone to figure it out on her own.

Harvey nodded. “Yes, it is about you two. I was just going to say that you both need to learn to speak your minds. Just talk to each

other. Work this thing out because even I can see that it's eating you alive. Both of you. Life's too short for anything less than happiness." He put his hat on. "Take it from me. Don't live in regret." He left, knowing she would have no choice but to think about it.

The sheriff's words hit her hard. She didn't want to live in regret, but how was she supposed to determine which path would lead to happiness and which to regret? If she reconciled with Luke and he found the strength to forgive her...what then? Could he ever be anything other than a bounty hunter with bounty hunter ways? She doubted it.

Miserably, she walked to the kitchen door and watched Luke mount up. She didn't have the heart to watch him leave again. She went to the living room and sat in her chair, staring out the window to the west—the direction of Wilma's Wandering and her father.

Harvey mounted up, eyeing Luke. "Leaving without a word, huh? Reckon that's a good idea?"

Luke shot him a hard look. "Do you know exactly how to get to this ravine?" He wouldn't be pushed or prodded into discussing Millie with anyone, not even the sheriff.

Heaving a sigh, he nodded. "Yeah, I reckon so." He whistled through his teeth and nudged his horse into a canter.

At the midpoint, they slowed to veer off the path and cross the field. "You know, Millie's a keeper. It'd be a shame to let a little misunderstanding run her off." Harvey glanced toward Luke and then looked back toward the mountain where they were headed.

"It wasn't so little to her, and she didn't seem all too happy that I had been telling her the truth this whole time. She couldn't even look at me after she saw the badge." Luke bit back on his words, not wanting to get into a deeply personal conversation with the sheriff. The man surely meant well, but he was still more of a stranger than not.

Harvey laughed. "I'm sorry. Misunderstandings never seem little to women. They're made different than us rugged, rough around the edges, hard-living men. You should know that. And she was happy after she saw the badge. I think she felt embarrassed. I don't know why, but that's the feeling I got from her." As the foothills of the mountain drew near, the trail came into view and Harvey turned toward it.

Luke followed, happy to let the sheriff lead the way. "What would have embarrassed her about seeing my badge?" He had turned it over in his mind but came up empty.

Shrugging, Harvey spoke over his shoulder. "I don't rightly know; I don't know what the misunderstanding was about, nor do I know what transpired between y'all when I left the room. I'm just telling you what I picked up from her actions. Figuring it out is all on you, buddy."

"That's just great because I don't have a clue."

Harvey smiled to himself but remained quiet. Luke needed time to think it through and he had no doubt that he would figure it out.

The winding path slowed their progress and Luke was agitated by the time they reached the end. "Well, I'm glad that's done. Can we move faster now?" His emotions were twisted, and he wanted to run Chester, lose some of his bad feelings to the thrill of speeding across the flat landscape.

Harvey said, "You bet we can. It's straight for a long ways ahead." Slapping the reins over his mount's flanks, he leaned into the instant gallop, loving the feeling of freedom it brought.

Luke ran Chester hard. The horse seemed to enjoy it as much as he did. Before long, his feelings had untwisted, and he could breathe easier. Isaac was a problem he could solve, and he concentrated on that. One problem at a time.

After a while, they slowed their gait again but kept up at a good pace.

Harvey whistled and Luke pulled Chester alongside him, matching his pace.

“See where the land starts up again?” He pointed almost dead ahead.

“Yeah.”

“The entrance to the ravine is just to the left of that. It’s a huge ravine that meanders around every which way. Keep your eyes peeled when we head in. No way of knowing if others have found the place.”

“How would they? It’s in the middle of nowhere. Who would think to come here?” Luke thought it was possibly a safer place than anywhere in town.

“That’s just it. I don’t know. For all we



know, someone could have seen him and followed him here. Bandits like to hide out in canyons and ravines. Be prepared for anything.” It had crossed his mind more than once that Isaac could have run into bandits in the ravine and they could have killed him. He hoped that wasn’t the case but kept an open mind to the possibility. “One thing’s for certain in this world; nothing is for certain.”

“You got that right.” Luke had learned that truth the hard way more than once.

Nearing the entrance, Luke went on high alert. The mostly yellow and brown landscape turned green and lush with vegetation just past the entrance. The land sloped downward, steeply at first and then leveling out a bit as they followed the route to the right.

“Let’s stick together. It wouldn’t be good for one of us to get lost in here.” Harvey grinned quickly at Luke, only half-joking.

“Sounds good.” The ravine was beautiful, and the foliage was lush. The stream was clear

and deeper than he had thought it would be. It made trying to track Isaac harder.

After a half-hour, he asked, "How far does this ravine go? I've not seen a track one that says anybody's been here."

Stopping at a fork in the route, Harvey dismounted. "It goes off to the left but dead-ends about five-hundred yards out if my memory serves me. Straight ahead here, is most likely where he'll be. There are other branches, but they all dead end, too. This way," He pointed ahead, "goes on through and there's an exit that looks like the place we entered. That's why I said we should stick together."

Shocked that such a beautiful, hidden place existed out in the middle of nowhere, Luke shook his head. "I thought I had been all over Colorado, but I guess I was wrong."

"Let's go on foot from here." Harvey moved over close to the sheer cliff and looked up. "Someone up top could spot someone

down here.”

“Maybe we can pick up his trail in the dust.” Luke pointed ahead where the wide swath of dirt looked like powder.

For another half-hour, they walked and searched, finding nothing. It was as if Isaac had never passed through there. A terrible thought occurred to Luke. “What if he never made it here?”

Harvey stopped and looked over at him. “That’s always a possibility, but we have to keep looking. He knew this place better than me; he used to bring his family up here a lot.” Hearing his own fears spoken aloud unnerved Harvey.

The ravine took a sharp turn to the left. There was barely room enough to walk beside the stream. Almost immediately, it took another sharp turn in the opposite direction. The ravine opened up after that and to Luke, it looked like the Garden of Eden must have looked.

Trees grew in little grassy fields to either side of the stream, bushes sprouted, and flowers bobbed in the breeze. Birds and butterflies dipped through the air. It was, for lack of a better word, perfect. There was a small cave in the wall to their right.

Harvey pointed and headed for the opening. It was so small that he had to take a knee to peer inside. The hollow wasn't big enough for a grown man to enter. Shaking his head, he stood. "Nothing bigger than a dog could use that for shelter."

Frustrated, Luke took his hat off and dusted against his thigh. As he looked at the ground in front of him, he noticed the grass had been trampled down. "Hey! Got something here."

He followed the trail of broken grass for a few minutes and the ravine slimmed again, taking a sharp right. The stream was smaller and shallower at the turn. Just as the land opened back up onto another little oasis of

perfection, Luke heard the whicker of a horse.

Harvey pointed to another cave; the opening to this one was much larger. To the left of the entrance was a fire pit. "Campsite." He held his finger to his lips. "Gotta make sure it's him."

Luke again let the sheriff take the lead and he kept a watch upward and behind them.

A man coughed and stumbled out of the cave. Harvey had his hand on his gun. Then he smiled and took off his hat. "It's him." He turned to Isaac and called out.

Isaac startled and reached for his rifle. Harvey said, "Isaac, it's Sheriff Roach, you're safe."

Isaac looked to Luke. "Who's that, Sheriff?"

"This is Deputy Houston." Harvey took a

seat on a large outcropping of rock near the base of the cliff and looked up. The outcropping halfway up the cliff would block the view of anyone up top. He thought Isaac had done chosen his campsite well.

Luke raised a hand in greeting as he walked toward Millie's father. "Hello, Mr. Thomas. I'm Luke."

Isaac squinted at him. "Nice to meet you, I reckon. I'm Isaac, but you know that, I'm sure. How's my daughter, Sheriff?" He turned back to Harvey.

"She's fine. She's a strong and brave young woman, Isaac." Harvey noted cuts and bruises on Isaac's face. They didn't seem infected, but he knew they were painful. His clothes were filthy, and his hair stuck out in every direction. The stubble on his face did little to hide his wounds.

After seeing Isaac with his own eyes, he wondered how anyone could have thought the man was a cold-blooded murderer. All he saw

was a broken man, badly beaten, and scared for his daughter more than for himself. Luke sat with his back against the cliff, in the shade.

Harvey said, "Isaac, Clyde McCormick is going to testify against Carson Morgan. He's the one who shot Samuel that night. He's also going to testify that the scene was made up to make it look as if you were the one who did it."

Isaac smiled and swooned. "I knew I couldn't have done it. I didn't have nothing against Sam. We were always on friendly terms. He was good people and I'm sure sorry he got killed like that. But I'm happy that everybody will know that I didn't do it, too." Most of all, he was happy that Millie would know the truth. With all his drinking and fighting lately, she had to have wondered at his guilt or innocence.

Luke spoke up. "Mr. Thomas, it's going to be a few days before the circuit judge gets into town. We've come to take you back, but Deacon's men might come after you. They're

still hoping to get their hands on you before the judge arrives. They want everyone to think you did this. Now, we'll keep you safe as possible. We won't let them know we have you at the jail, but Millie can't come visiting you or it'll give it away."

Harvey agreed. "Anyone wanting to get their hands on you will have to go through the both of us first. He's right; we need to keep you there in secret as long as possible." Harvey smiled sadly at the shell of the man standing in front of him. Isaac had been diminished by grief and now this incident; he might never fully recover, which was sad to Harvey.

Looking from Harvey to Luke and back again, Isaac rubbed his chin stubble. "I don't understand why they want to hang me for. I didn't do it." He never considered himself an extremely smart man, but he didn't think he was dumb either. None of this seemed to make sense to him, though.

Luke and Harvey spent a few minutes



explaining the whole ordeal to him.

“Deacon Owens and me never got along, but I didn’t think he would try to have me killed just to cover his own hide. That gives me a whole new reason to hate him.” Isaac tried never to hold a grudge, but this time, it was justified.

They gathered Isaac’s belongings and loaded his horse. Luke was amazed at all the things Millie had thought to include. His heart pained as he thought what a marvelous woman she was and how thoughtful she was.

The trek out of Wilma’s Wandering seemed faster than their entry. However, the ride back to Haven Ridge seemed to stretch out forever. Luke thought it was because Isaac was with them. Not only did that slow them down, but it also gave him a reason to be more vigilant. He worried more that they would run into other bounty hunters on his trail or Deacon’s men.



# Chapter Twenty

Stopping short of leaving the mountain path, Harvey dismounted. “I think we’d best wait for full dark before we head back into town. We’ll be spotted for sure before then.” He hadn’t come this far to botch the job and put Isaac in danger before getting him to safety.

“Could we just go a little farther and stop by the homestead? I’d love to see Millie, Sheriff.” Isaac dismounted with great effort. His side hurt fiercely, and he allowed Luke to help him.

“We can’t risk it, Isaac.” Harvey pulled a packet of jerky from his saddlebag and gave them each a large piece.

“He’s right, Mr. Thomas. We have to get you safely to the jail and then we’ll let Millie know that you’re okay. You can see her after this business is done.” Luke felt for the man,

but his first priority had to be keeping him safe. He had promised Millie that he would see to her father's safe return, and he meant to keep that promise, even if she was still mad at him. Even if she never wanted to see him again.

"You ain't always been a lawman, have you?" Isaac directed the question at Luke.

"No, sir. I've been a bounty hunter my whole life." He had never been ashamed of his profession, but he came close that evening. Somewhere deep inside, he harbored the hope that Isaac would like him. If the day ever came that Millie wanted to see him again, her father could give his blessing.

"Really? How long you been a deputy?"

Laughing, Luke said, "A few hours now."

Isaac grinned. "I would have guessed longer. You seem to have a good head on your shoulders, and you have good in you. How'd

you accomplish that being a bounty hunter?”

“I don’t know.” Luke let the conversation die down.

All three men sat quietly as they waited for sunset. Isaac laid back onto the ground and put his hands behind his head, dozing fitfully. Harvey stared in the direction of Haven Ridge, and Luke contemplated what he would do after the trial.

He liked being a deputy. It gave him a sense of pride he had not possessed as a bounty hunter. It was a more stable lifestyle, too.

Sunset came and Luke helped Isaac onto his horse. The three rode to the midpoint and Harvey noted the way Isaac turned in his saddle to look back toward his home. They skirted the edge of town and entered near Harvey’s house, sticking to the shadows as they moved toward the jail.

With the horses at the side, shrouded by the deep shadow of the building, Sheriff Roach hurriedly unlocked the door and Luke rushed Isaac inside. The sheriff shut the door and went to the cell, opening the door.

Isaac entered and sat on the cot. "One of you gonna stay here with me through the night?" The fear in his voice was plain. He didn't try to conceal it.

"Yes, I'll stay tonight. We won't leave you alone except for during the day when I normally wouldn't be in here anyway." Harvey turned to Luke. "Need to do something with his horse. Somebody'll notice him come daylight."

"You could take him back home and let Millie know I'm okay. Tell her, I love her." His voice cracked with emotion.

"I can do that. She'll appreciate knowing." Luke's heart leaped into his throat at the thought of seeing her and talking with her again. His head told him it was a bad idea and

that he should leave well enough alone, but his heart told him differently.

“I think that would be a good idea, Luke. Be sure no one sees you.” Harvey nodded as Luke headed for the door.

Leading Bruno to the end of town, Luke had a moment when he was sure he had been spotted. A man called out and Luke stopped, looking back toward the center of town. The man waved his hand over his head and yelled, “Hey, come on back now.”

Not moving, Luke watched the man. After a few seconds, a woman emerged from the shadows between two buildings. The man held his arms out wide and hugged the woman. He could hear them muttering but couldn’t make out any words. His heart settled and he sighed, relieved.

Once they were on the path to the midpoint, Luke allowed himself to relax a little. He urged the horses to move faster as he neared Millie’s place. Again, he found it

difficult to wait to tell her good news.

If he was lucky, she would reward him with a smile and possibly a hug. He wouldn't hold his breath for either reaction, but he would hold to the hope.

When he rode to the front of the house, there was only a single lantern light flickering in the living room. It was burning low and dim. He tethered the horses and waited, but Millie didn't open the door as she had the other times he had arrived.

Stepping to the door, he knocked lightly. Still, she didn't answer. Fighting the panic in his chest, he knocked again, louder, and then listened intently for any sound of movement. Nothing. Letting the screen door bang shut, he moved to the living room window and tried to peer through the curtain. He saw no movement, no shadows, nothing.

Rushing to the kitchen door, he thumped loudly. "Millie? It's Luke, are you in there?" After three seconds, he banged even louder on



the door. "Millie!"

He moved to the living room window and rapped it with his knuckles. He was almost sure that something terrible had happened. Stepping to the front door, he opened the screen door and poised to ram the door with his shoulder.

Just as he took a deep breath, the door flew inward, startling him so badly he nearly fell.

"You don't have to pound down the door, Mr. Houston!" She stood in her nightdress covered with a robe. Her hair was disheveled and her eyes puffy.

"Oh, you were asleep? I thought..." He stopped speaking and looked toward the horses and then back to her.

"You thought what? That I was deaf?" She moved aside, peering around him. "You're alone?"

“I thought something terrible had...” He stopped again. “Yes, I’m alone. No, I’m not. I...” Frustrated again, he stepped aside and motioned toward Bruno, still packed with her father’s belongings.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped as she recognized Bruno. “Bruno!” She ran past Luke, down the steps, and to Bruno. She hugged the horse and looked around to Luke. “Where’s my father?”

That was just great. She yelled at him and hugged the horse. Exasperated by her actions, he pointed toward town. “He’s at the jail station with the sheriff. He’s okay and wanted me to tell you that he loves you.”

Tears welled in her eyes and Luke took a step back, unsure if she would unleash on him, or if the tears were happy ones this time. She hugged Bruno again and sobbed for a moment. Luke wanted to comfort her but was afraid to interrupt or touch her.

“Can I see him, please? I’ll get dressed and we can go now, while it’s dark. No one will see us.” She rushed past him and back to the porch.

“We can’t. It’s still too dangerous. The circuit judge won’t be here for a few days yet and we want to keep it secret that he’s in town. I’m sorry.”

She looked crestfallen and sullen. “All because of Deacon Owens.”

“I’m afraid so.” Luke stepped back as she tromped past him again.

She started unloading the horse and Luke moved to help her. She handed him items in silence and then motioned for him to bring them into the house. “Put them on Papa’s bed; I’ll put them away later.” She watched Luke as he put the items on the bed in the dark. Her heart fluttered as he walked across the kitchen toward her again. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Uncomfortable under her gaze and her silence, Luke fidgeted with his hands and looked away.

Recalling Sheriff Roach’s advice earlier, she wanted to say what was on her mind, what was in her heart, but she couldn’t. He would surely rebuff her after the way she had talked to him. Saddened, she turned away slowly. It was easier to speak without looking at him. “Would you like something to eat?”

“No. I don’t want to put you out any more than I already have, Mill—Miss Thomas.” He didn’t understand why she was so upset with him and kept her back to him, but he took it as her way of letting him know she didn’t want his company any longer. *Maybe now that her father is back safe, she doesn’t have any use of me*, he thought. Immediately, he felt bad for having that thought. But it was there nevertheless and there was nothing to be done about it.

Luke turned and started for the door. “Would you like me to put Bruno in the barn

before I leave?”

“No, thank you. I’ll see to him.” He had called her ‘Miss Thomas’ again. Her heart sank. She turned toward her room in a way that allowed her to avoid eye contact with him. Bruno was her responsibility and she wanted to see to him. She wanted even more to see her father but understood the dangers.

As she pulled a thicker robe on and slid shoes on her feet, Millie heard the front door close softly. Her first reaction was to cry. He had sneaked out and left without even saying goodbye. Then, after a few seconds of tears, she grew angry. Her first instinct that he had only been using her to gain her father’s whereabouts had been right, but it hadn’t been for the reward money. He had been fishing for the position he now held as deputy.

Slumping against the bedpost, she shook her head. *That makes no sense and you know it,* she thought. *You just hurt his feelings so bad with your accusations that he can’t get over it. You messed up and there’s nothing for it except to*

*move forward from here.*

Drying her eyes for what seemed to be the hundredth time in the last two days, she squared her shoulders and grabbed her lantern. Heading out the front door toward Bruno, she gave a surprised yelp as Luke stepped from behind the horse.

“Are you trying to scare me to death?” Her words were harsher than she had intended. Seeing his wounded expression, she rushed on with an apology. “I’m sorry. You startled me, though. I thought you left.” She was simultaneously happy that he had not left and irritated that he had been lurking quietly in the dark.

“I didn’t mean to. I started to leave, but it’s really not a good idea for you to go traipsing down to the barn alone in the dark.” Luke looked down at the ground. She was so stubborn that she would risk endangering herself rather than just allowing him to put Bruno in the stall. He didn’t think he had ever met such a headstrong woman. He looked

back to her when she remained silent.

Her expression relaxed as she raised the lantern. The flames cast a soft, dancing glow over her features. He was glad to see it and smiled a little.

Nodding, she said, "All right. Thank you. I hadn't even thought of being in danger; I was only thinking that you were in a hurry and probably you were tired." She took a deep breath. *Maybe there's hope after all, she thought, if he's that worried about my safety.*

Tipping his hat at her without taking it completely off, he replied, "You're welcome." He took Bruno's reins and turned the horse toward the barn.

Millie walked on one side of the horse and Luke on the other. In the barn, she hung the lantern on a nail and allowed Luke to help her tend the horse. It was obvious to her that Bruno had been roughing it for a few days, his coat was dirty, and he was jittery as she brushed away the little clots of dried debris.

Luke walked her back to the house but remained on the porch. "We're going to do all we can to keep your father safely hidden until the circuit judge shows up, but I need you to promise you won't go to town and try to see him for any reason. All it would take is for one of Deacon's men to see you enter the jail. They find out he's there, and we got a riot on our hands." He didn't intend to scare her yet again, but knew it was necessary.

She nodded and rubbed her hands together lightly. "Would you like to wash up before you leave?"

"Millie, promise me." His voice was more commanding than he had meant for it to be, but she was evading, and he knew it.

With fire in her eyes, she almost yelled at him. "Fine! I won't go into town for anything." She turned and almost slammed the door in his face. Pausing, she glared at him. When he had used her first name again, it had been to give her an order. He wasn't her father or her



husband. In her mind, he had no right to order her to do anything. "You better not let him get hurt, Luke Houston. I think locking him up in that jail is dangerous; he would be safer right here." Tears stung her eyes and she wondered how she could have more tears left with all the crying she had done recently.

"Millie, I'm sorry, but it's not just dangerous for him but for you, too." Luke snatched his hat off his head and slapped it against his thigh in frustration. "And for me and Sheriff Roach. Not to mention the innocent townsfolk that might get hurt if we have to defend him against Deacon's men. Can't you just trust me on this?" The volume of his voice had risen to an uncomfortable level. He wasn't a man to raise his voice—especially not toward women, but she was making him crazy.

"You hang all that on me? Really? I told you I wouldn't go, and I won't! I'm not simple-minded, and I understand the dangers, believe it or not. You act like I'm going to do something stupid the minute you turn your back." Her lungs burned as she breathed deep,

trying to force air into her constricted chest.

Cramming his hat back onto his head, Luke held up both hands and took a step back, nodding. "I didn't say any of that. I know how much you love your father; I just had to hear you say you'd stay away until it was safe." He bounded down the steps to the grass and turned. "I'll keep you in the know; me or Sheriff Roach, that is." He had an idea he wouldn't be going back to the Thomas homestead for a while. Millie couldn't have made it any clearer that she didn't want him around.

"Great. You've had your say and now you're just gonna run off into the night." She slammed the door and threw the lock into place. Stomping off to her room, she slammed that door as well.

She didn't exactly know why she was so infuriated at Luke, she wanted him with all her heart, and he had proven he was honorable. His ability to rake at her already raw emotions proved to be too much for her to

bear in silence, though.

Crumpling to her bed, she cried herself to sleep for the second time that night.

Luke rode back toward town hard, hoping the exertion would make him feel better. It did not.

At Maisy's, he went to his room and locked his door, collapsing onto the bed without taking off his boots. The window was open, and he could see the diamond glints of stars in the dark sky. Still stewing with irritation, he watched the sky but couldn't enjoy it, couldn't pick out a single constellation; the friction between him and Millie drained all the joy out of everything, it seemed.

He fell asleep fretting over his wounded heart and hurt pride.



# Chapter Twenty-

## One

Waking before sunrise, Luke rolled to the side of the bed and sat up. His head throbbed in time with his heartbeat, and every joint ached. That he had slept in his boots didn't help, he was sure. Checking the time, he saw that it was four in the morning. Sheriff Roach would be making his usual walkabout in town.

One of the women had thoughtfully filled the pitcher by the washbasin and laid out a towel. He moved stiffly to it and washed his face, neck and hands. He scooted a chair to the window and sat watching the dark, empty street below.

His mind wandered back to Millie. He was used to being alone with his feelings, whatever they might be. Dwelling on problems had become a normal routine with him, but when

it came to Millie, it seemed there was nothing normal about the situation from the way they met to the way they had parted.

It was a problem that he couldn't find a solution to, no matter how he thought about it. She didn't trust him anymore, and from the way she acted, he had doubts that she even liked him.

Forcing his attention back to the street below, he noticed the sky had lightened in anticipation of sunrise. Sheriff Roach had not made an appearance yet, and he stood to look farther up the street, hoping nothing had gone wrong.

With sunrise imminent, and still no sign of the sheriff, Luke cursed himself for a fool. He should have stopped at the jail station before heading back to Millie's the previous night. Instead, he had let his foolish heart rule his head and had gone straight back to his room.

Hurrying out of Maisey's, Luke stepped slowly to the street, turning to check in both

directions. Sheriff Roach stepped from between Maisy's and the livery, startling him. They both reached for their guns and then stopped, chuckling nervously.

Luke walked toward him. "Is everything still all right?"

Nodding, Sheriff Roach adjusted his hat. "Yeah. Just doing my usual walkabout. Figure it's best that everything seems normal." He kept his voice low even though they were the only ones on the street at the early hour. It wouldn't be difficult for someone to overhear them from Maisy's. He motioned Luke to walk with him.

"How's Isaac doing?" Luke wanted to avoid questions about Millie, which he knew were inevitable.

"Glad to be on a cot instead of the ground, I think. Old man's a light sleeper, though. He was standing at the bars when I went in this morning." Harvey had considered letting Isaac have a pistol and had gone so far as to offer

him one, but Isaac shook his head and looked at the weapon as if Harvey had offered him a rattlesnake instead of a gun. Harvey told Luke the story.

“It’s probably for the best. That could stir up a whole heap of new trouble if it got out that we had an armed prisoner in there.” Luke scanned the windows of the nearby businesses. In a few, he could see the dim flicker of candles as shop owners awoke to start their days.

“Might not set to good with the circuit judge, either. But if Deacon’s men find out he’s there and they overrun the place, we’re going to be put to the test trying to protect ourselves and him. If he had a gun, at least he could defend himself.” Seeing the same candleflames signaling the beginning of the workday in Haven Ridge, Harvey hastened his steps.

“Let’s hope it don’t come to that.” Luke kept in-stride with the sheriff. As they neared the jail station, he heard a man coughing and the sound was obviously coming from the jail.



He and the sheriff exchanged a wide-eyed look and they both hurried to the jail.

Harvey unlocked the door, Luke followed him inside, closing it again. Isaac lay curled on his side, coughing loudly. The sheriff fumbled with the water pitcher and finally succeeded in pouring a half cup without spilling it on himself. Rushing to the cell, he unlocked it. Luke stepped inside and helped Isaac sit upright. The coughing eased a bit, but the rattle in his chest had sounded bad.

Harvey held the cup of water out for Isaac. "Drink up, Isaac." He looked to Luke and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff, but my chest is tight, and my ribs hurt like mad." Isaac drank more of the water.

Isaac's body heat was tremendous against Luke's arm. He was so hot that Luke could feel the fever rolling off him in waves. He looked at the sheriff. "He's burning up. I think he's fevered."

Harvey looked down and took off his hat. Then he stood and paced out of the cell. "We have to do something. If anybody hears him coughing, they'll be wondering who we got locked up in here."

Isaac gave Luke the cup and laid on the cot again, weak. "I'll be fine. It's probably just sleeping out in the open like that when I wasn't used to it. Gave me the croup. I'll be fine."

But then another coughing fit wracked him, and Luke had to pull him upright again. He shook his head at Sheriff Roach. "He needs a doctor."

The sheriff stopped pacing and looked hard at the two men. It was obvious that Isaac was sick. His pale face stood in stark contrast to Luke's sun-browned and healthy one. He could see the sweat slicking Isaac's face from ten feet away.

Luke put the pillow against the wall and then helped Isaac put his back against it. Joining the sheriff in the office, he said, "He needs a doctor. Is there one we can trust to keep his yap shut?"

Harvey shrugged. "I don't know. I've never had to find a doctor who'd keep his mouth shut, Luke." He didn't mean to bite at his deputy but thought it was a ridiculous question.

"Okay, then someone who can tend to him that ain't a doctor. Surely there's someone." Every town had their womenfolk who could cure as well as any doctor, and he hoped Haven Ridge was no exception.

Harvey wracked his brain and the only name he could come up with was Widow Tester. "Widow Tester. She doctored all her kids and most of her grandkids. She's as good as any doctor and she don't join in the gossip circles. Keeps to herself. She'd have no reason to go blab about Isaac being here."

“I’ll stay with Isaac while you go fetch her,” Luke offered.

Nodding, Harvey headed for the door. “It’ll take a couple hours to get her here. If anyone stops by, just let them knock, don’t open the door for anybody but me.”

“Got it.” Luke locked the door behind him and returned to Isaac with more water.

“I’m sorry for the trouble, Deputy.” Isaac shook his head and looked to the cup in his hands.

“It’s not your fault, Mr. Thomas. The sheriff’s gone to fetch Widow Tester; they’ll be back in a couple hours and she’ll have you right as rain again.” Luke looked to the little glassless window in his cell. The only thing between them and the outside were the five iron bars across it.

Isaac followed his gaze. Whispering, he said, “We better whisper, I guess.”

Luke nodded, thinking it would be best if they didn't talk at all. But Isaac motioned for him to sit beside him. Reluctantly, Luke perched on the edge of the cot, training most of his attention to picking up sounds outside. He didn't want anyone wandering by and hearing Isaac or himself talking.

"How's my Millie? Did you give her my message?" If he could have changed one thing in his life, it would have been that Wilma would have lived. The one thing he should have done was giving up the drinking before it caused his Millie so much grief. But he had knowingly let the alcohol take hold and rule him after Wilma's death, and now his daughter was paying a high price for it.

"Miss Thomas is..." Luke sighed, thought for a second, and continued, "she's fine. She loves you very much, Mr. Thomas."

Isaac grinned and rested his head against the wall. "You'll keep an eye on her, won't you? I don't want Deacon sending men out to

her and her there all alone. You know how bad that could be. He might try to use her to get to me. Can't be trusted, that one." Although he didn't approve of gun violence, he thought he could shoot Deacon Owens and not lose much sleep over it. Especially if he hurt Millie.

Luke nodded. "You have my word, Mr. Thomas. I'll do everything I can to keep her safe." *Until she runs me off with the gun or shoots me*, he thought wryly, not really believing she would, but unsure enough to have the thought, anyway.

Patting Luke's arm weakly, Isaac smiled. He wanted only to lie down and sleep again. "I want to lay down here and sleep now. I'm dog tired."

Luke helped him lie down again. No sooner than he was down, he started coughing again. Luke, shaking his head, apologized and sat him up against the wall.

"It's the ribs. They're broke and trying to

set up infected.” Isaac stated this flatly.

Luke moved quickly, retrieving another cot blanket. He took the one from the cot and folded them both together. Putting the pillow atop the blankets, he nodded, satisfied it would be high enough to allow Mr. Thomas to rest without coughing and alerting the whole town to his presence in the jail.

Getting Isaac situated was difficult because of his painful injuries, but he finally managed it. Sweating profusely in the stale air of the station, Luke fanned himself with his hat. He didn't dare open the door or step outside. Deacon's men would be about town. He pulled the black drapes together over the two windows in the office and sat in the guest chair. Positioning the chair so that he could see easily into the cell, he continued to fan with his hat as Isaac fell into a deep sleep.

Isaac woke within the hour. He was burning up with the fever and needed water. Luke had left the cell open, but the man had not offered to come out. Instead, he had

waited on Luke to bring him more water.

The pitcher was almost out, and the only other water close by was outside in a barrel by the corner of the jail. Luke hoped the sheriff would think to bring fresh water back with him; barrel water wasn't always the best for drinking, not for people, anyway.

"Sheriff tells me that you might not stay after the trial's over." Isaac handed him the cup and thanked him.

"I don't rightfully know what I'm going to do." He hadn't thought overly much about whether he would stay or go.

"He says you been a bounty hunter dang-near all your life. I guess it would be hard to settle down when you ain't never had anywhere to settle before." Isaac rubbed absently at his aching ribs, noting the excessive amount of heat coming off his body. It was by far the worst fever he had ever suffered.



“Yeah, that’s what my head keeps telling me, too.” Luke took the cup back and set it by the pitcher.

“Well, what’s your heart tell you about it?” Isaac carefully laid down again, grunting with the effort.

Luke shrugged. “I like the idea of being a deputy, to be honest.” He paced back into the cell so he could keep his voice low.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I thought I was proud of being a bounty hunter all those years, but I never felt like this about it.” He looked down at the badge, still pinned to his shirt. He thought his parents would have been proud to see him wear the badge. Of course, he had thought Millie would have been glad to see it, too, but apparently, she hadn’t been too happy about it.

“And, what about Haven Ridge? What do you think of our little town?” Isaac wanted to drift back to sleep but didn’t like the way his body felt upon waking; heavy like something was pressing down on him, making him weak and making it hard to breathe.

Giving a silent chuckle, Luke shook his head. “Haven Ridge is like a lot of little towns. Nice, quaint, and apparently run by a corrupt man.”

“Oh. Not such a purty opinion, then, huh?” Isaac knew most small towns in the West were run by men like Deacon, some were worse while others were not quite as deadly as Deacon, but still every bit as corrupt.

“I’ll just have to think on it some more. You should rest now. The sheriff shouldn’t be much longer.” Luke went back to the office, sighing. *Why’d he have to bring up my staying here?* he wondered. Every time he set to thinking about it, his mind curled around Millie again.

If he stayed, he could at least be close to her. He might even be able to win her over in the end.

Isaac whispered Luke's name loudly and he went to the cell. "What did you think of the homestead?"

"Mr. Thomas, your place is really nice." He was becoming exasperated with the questions.

"Did you know that my Millie has been keeping it up mostly by herself for a year now?" He smiled broadly, proud that his daughter was capable enough to accomplish such a feat and sad because his ignorant actions had put her in that position.

Luke merely nodded. The bustle of people moving outside let him know the day was in full swing outside. Anyone could walk by the cell window at any time and overhear their voices.

“I need to do a lot of work to the place, but I’m sure you saw that already. It’s a shame I’ve let it go like I have, but when Wilma got sick, I couldn’t do anything but sit with her. When she died, I picked up the drinking. A place can run down quick when a man don’t tend to it proper. Just like a marriage.” He chuckled and Luke shushed him to be quieter.

“Go to sleep now. Someone might hear us.” He left the cell again, wondering if the man had just given him advice about relationships, or if he had likened it to tending to chores because of the fever. Luke supposed the point was valid, no matter why it was made.

Just as the heat threatened to be too much for Luke to bear, Sheriff Roach arrived. He had a saddlebag over his shoulder when he entered.

“Where’s Widow Tester?” Luke armed sweat from his face again and put his hat back on.

“I explained the situation to her, told her about Isaac’s injuries and she sent medicine. Said if he got worse to come back and she would see him. Otherwise, she wants to stay out of it.” Harvey couldn’t blame the widow. She feared Deacon’s reprisal just as much as anyone else did.

Sheriff Roach unloaded the saddlebag and set the corked glass bottles of medicine on his desk. He also set out a whole loaf of bread, a block of cheese, and some beef jerky. “It ain’t much, but it’ll be some food sitting around for all of us, so we don’t draw suspicion by bringing in food from The Saloon or Maisy’s.”

“Right now, anything looks good.” Luke grinned. “What about water? He finished almost all the pitcher.”

“I’ll fetch some as soon as I give him a dose of this medicine. She said three times a day and his fever should go away in a day or two. I have cloth to wrap those ribs, too. I bet Wade broke ’em.” He set the cloth on the desk and let the flap fall closed on the bag.

After giving Isaac medicine, the sheriff fixed a plate of bread and cheese and took that to him as well. On his way to fetch more fresh water, he paused. "How was Millie? You've not said a word about her."

Sighing, he looked down. "She's fine. I helped her tend to Bruno, and they are both probably still sleeping right now."

Noting the forced, flat tone, Harvey nodded, hoping Millie had taken his advice and told Luke how she felt about him. "Good. You told her not to come here, right?"

Luke nodded. "Yep. She assured me strongly that she will not." He forced a smile and rocked back on his heels, wishing the questions would come to a halt already.

"Good." Harvey stepped outside, shutting the door.



# Chapter Twenty-

## Two

Knowing her father was in town made Millie anxious. She wandered through the house and out to the garden, unable to focus on any one task for more than a few minutes at a time. Luke or Sheriff Roach was supposed to keep her up to date on what was happening. That it was past noon, and she had seen neither man made her nervous.

As she checked the bean vines, her eyes kept drifting up and toward town. She hoped to see Luke riding toward her. “Surely, one of them will be here soon to tell me everything’s all right. I’m just being a nervous Nellie,” she told the vines as she plucked a few full beans from it.

Filling her basket a quarter of the way with beans, she moved on to the potatoes.



Again, she stood and shielded her eyes from the sun and peered toward town. There were no telltale swirls of dust anywhere in that direction that would lead her to believe anyone was riding toward her place. Sighing heavily, she dusted her hands and tromped toward the house again.

It was difficult to sit at the table and prepare the beans. It was impossible.

Huffing in frustration, she stood and walked to the kitchen door. Outside, she stood overlooking the property from the porch. It was a beautiful day with a mild breeze carrying the scent of summer flowers.

Looking toward town, she saw no sign of any messenger again. Forgetting about her beans, she walked to the barn to see Bruno. She went inside and straight to his stall. He bobbed his head and whickered softly at her as she approached.

It was better to be outside where there was fresh air and sunshine instead of in the

house where only sad memories seemed to lurk at every turn: mama's unfinished quilt, Papa's favorite chair sitting empty, and Luke's place at the kitchen table empty as well.

As she entered the house again, she saw that she had passed two hours outside. She was glad of it, but that meant it was two in the afternoon and still there was no word of her father. She didn't know how much more she could take.

The decision to go and see her father formed in her mind. It didn't matter what Luke said. Her father was all she had left in the world. If something happened to him, she would never forgive herself—especially if she remained safe at home while those awful men were plotting to kill him. She could take her rifle and stay inside the jail station. She didn't think Luke or the Sheriff would physically remove her if she stubbornly stayed. They were both too gentlemanly for that.

An hour later, as she was dropping the potatoes into the pot with the beans, the

distinct sound of hooves drew her attention. Racing to the kitchen door, hoping to see Luke, she was faced with Sheriff Roach.

Her heart dropped as she opened the door and invited him inside.

“Well, don’t look so happy to see me next time.” He chuckled and removed his hat. Her expression had gone from wide-eyed and smiling, to pure sadness as she had realized who he was. “Expecting someone else, perhaps?”

“I’m sorry. No. Not really.” She motioned to a seat at the table. “Coffee?”

“Coffee would be great. Luke is sitting with your father.” He had a hunch that Luke was who she was hoping would show up.

She poured his coffee and handed it to him. Thumping down into a chair without a bit of grace, she smirked. “That’s mighty nice of him.”

Harvey sipped the coffee. It was strong and had apparently been sitting on the heat too long. "As a matter of fact, it is. I'm right proud of how he's coming along. Your father has taken a real shine to him, too."

"My father? How is he, Sheriff?" She nibbled at her bottom lip.

"Well, now, he's taken ill and had himself a bit of a fever, but," he held up his hand to quiet her, "I got medicine from Widow Tester, and he's doing much better today. He'll be fine. It was most likely caused by his being injured and sleeping out in the night air."

"I told Luke that Papa would be better off if y'all had just brought him home. I could be looking after him if he was here. I don't think Deacon, or his men would come here looking for him, Sheriff and it's not like he'd run off before the trial. You know that." She pleaded with her eyes, hoping Sheriff Roach would give in to her and bring her father home.

Looking down to his lap, Harvey sighed. She made a good point, but he didn't think she understood how dangerous such an act would be. "Miss Thomas, I just don't think that's the wise thing to do here. I'm not so much worried that Deacon will come here looking for Isaac as I am that he will show up here looking for you."

Millie, dumbfounded, gave him a quizzical look. "I don't understand."

"He would use you as leverage to get to your father, I believe. Luke and I have been taking turns keeping an eye on the path toward your place. I only came to tell you about your father's illness. I thought you'd want to know. Other than that, I think it's a good idea for me and Luke to stay where we are most of the time. And for you to stay where you are."

Millie's blood froze up. "What? Then, how am I safe staying here alone?"

"If anybody rides this way, me or Luke

will see them. They won't get far." Harvey hoped that was true, anyway. With it only being him and Luke, someone might be able to slip past them, but the whorls of dust in the air from their progress on the path would still signal them.

*Luke was trying to warn me about that, she thought, that's why he got so upset when he thought I might go to town.* Covering her face with her hands, she wondered how she could not have understood Luke's worry. Again, he had proven himself to be a real gentleman. He had only been concerned about her.

"Do you have your gun handy?" Harvey looked around the kitchen but didn't see it.

Dropping her hands, Millie nodded. "It's by the fireplace in its usual spot." She nodded toward the living room.

"Do me a favor?" Harvey stood, leaving the too-strong coffee on the table.

She nodded again, feeling empty inside. *How could I have been so wrong about Luke so many times?* She looked up at the sheriff, suddenly too worn out to stand.

“Keep your doors locked. Just a precaution. I would suggest not being outside milling around after dark, too.” He smiled and put his hat back on as he walked to the door.

Making herself stand, she agreed. “I’ll feel like a prisoner in my own home before the day’s out.” She chuckled humorlessly.

“It’s only for a couple more days and then this will be over. Thank you for the coffee.” Harvey headed out.

From the door, Millie called to him, halting his steps. He turned. “Yes?”

“Would you give Luke my thanks?” She smiled weakly at him.

“Never had that talk with him like I told you to, did you?” He could tell she was smitten with the Deputy, but he also knew she had said some hurtful things to him in the heat of the moment. “Misunderstandings, harsh words, they can all be forgiven, you know.” He turned and mounted up. “I’ll give him your message. Lock up and stay safe.”

She raised a hand to him in parting. *Was he right? Could Luke forgive her for the way she had spoken to him?* She closed the kitchen door and slid the bolt lock into place, and then did the same with the living room door.

If Luke was staying with her father, tending his illness and keeping him safe from Deacon’s men, that said a lot of good about him.

She made up her mind to talk to him after the trial was finished. The few days until then would give her plenty of time to think how she would approach him and what exactly she would say to him. For now, knowing that her father was recovering well from his illness and



that she and her father were safe were small comforts that she would cling to.

Smiling, she sat in her mother's chair and looked out over the fields toward town, allowing her mind to wander freely for the first time in a long time.

Oddly enough, her mind continued building the plan to go to her father even though she had been warned not to. How could she leave him in that awful jail, sick, hurting, alone? Well, she knew he wasn't exactly alone, but he had no family with him to comfort him.

The sun's light fell through the window and glinted off the barrel of the rifle.

*What if Deacon's men attack and I'm not there and Papa gets killed? She sat straight and stiff in the chair, still eyeing the rifle. I'd never know if I could have made a difference or not. Perhaps my presence could save his life.*

But if she obeyed Luke and the sheriff, she would never know.



# Chapter Twenty-

## Three

Harvey was greeted by a concerned Luke as soon as he stepped through the jail station door. “He took a big coughing fit right after you left, and there were some boys out back there,” Luke pointed to the back wall. “They heard him. I heard them talking and then I heard them running in the direction of Deacon’s place.”

Thinking it over for a few seconds, Harvey shook his head. “Nah. They couldn’t have known it was Isaac. It was probably some boys who stole their daddy’s moonshine and old Isaac’s coughing startled them. They lit out to keep from being seen. Saving their own hides, that’s all.” But something gnawed at his gut. If the boys did run and tell Deacon, he would surely show up and demand to know who was in the cell.

“But what if they did? Or, what if they just tell Deacon that’s who they think it is?” Luke knew Deacon had all the boys around in his pocket. He gave them coins for information all the time, no matter how reliable it was.

“Okay. We might as well get ready for a visit from him.” Harvey opened the door and stepped off the porch and looked toward Deacon’s place far behind the jail. There were no whorls of dust and no riders visible. Yet.

Back inside, he shut the door and sat at his desk. “How’s he doing?”

Luke nodded. “The fever’s gone down, but he’s still coughing something terrible.” Luke took the seat in front of the desk. “When’s the judge gonna get here?”

“Day after tomorrow at the earliest.” Harvey looked to the time. It was nearly four. Too early to try and take Isaac to Millie’s. “Maybe we should take him to Millie’s and let

her hide him somewhere out there until then. The barn, the shed, the attic.”

Luke shook his head. “Somebody’ll see us leave with him and it’s my bet that Deacon will be here long before dark when we might be able to sneak him out.”

Harvey nodded. “You’re right. He’s probably safer right here with us anyway.”

Luke stood and paced; the familiar tightening of his insides plagued him as he waited for the inevitable. The sheriff had pulled the curtains back on the window that looked out toward the Thomas homestead and every few seconds. Luke looked in that direction. “How safe is Millie out there by herself?” The question chewed at him. He had made a promise to keep her father safe, but he didn’t want to do that and leave her to harm.

“She’s safe enough. For now.” Harvey knew it was true for the time being, but he couldn’t be sure of her safety after Deacon got wind of Isaac being in the jail.

Luke continued to pace, feeling like a caged animal. Finally, he flopped into the seat. "I hate waiting like this. If they're coming, I wish they'd come on already." Sweat rolled off his forehead.

"Let's not rush it. We don't even know for sure those boys were heading to Deacon's place. We might be getting all riled up for nothing." Harvey thought differently but tried to be a calming influence on Luke. He knew that Luke wasn't only worried for them and Isaac, but he also worried for Millie out at the house alone.

Isaac woke and coughed lightly, covering his face with both hands and exerting great effort to quiet the noise. He felt better and was happy to see that he wasn't covered in the sick sweat of the fever any longer. Moving quietly, he poured himself water from the pitcher Luke had left in his cell earlier. The cell door wasn't closed, but he made no move to exit. The sheriff and his deputy seemed to be under considerable stress, and he didn't want to add to it. He had caused enough trouble to last

him a lifetime.

The sheriff came to the open cell. “I saw Millie, Isaac.”

Isaac’s heart leaped up into his throat. “My Millie. How is she?”

Nodding, Harvey said, “She’s doing good, Isaac.” Just then he remembered her message for Luke and turned to him. “By the way, Millie said to give you her thanks for what you’ve done and continue to do.”

Luke looked up, surprised. “Really?” He didn’t know whether to believe him or not. But he thought the sheriff had no reason to lie and didn’t suspect he was very good at lying, anyway.

Harvey nodded, smiling, and turned back to Isaac. “How you feeling today? Any better?”



Isaac's grin was wide as he looked from Luke to the sheriff. "Oh, yeah, loads better." He leaned forward and whispered, "Millie and the deputy are sweet on each other, ain't they, Sheriff?"

Chuckling low, Harvey raised his eyebrows. "I think they just might be."

"I could tell 'cause of how he looked every time her name was mentioned. And, he keeps looking out that window like a dog that wants to go home. Only thing out that way is my place." Isaac coughed again, covering his mouth with the crook of his elbow.

Harvey nodded again. "Yep. I know that, Isaac." He stepped away from the cell and closed the door. "I'm going to close this up in case Deacon visits, which we think he will shortly."

"Yeah, them boys heard me in here. I'm sorry. I couldn't stop the coughing, though. Darn near made me pass out."

Just as Harvey closed the cell door, the pounding hoofbeats of a fast approaching horse made his heartbeat speed up. Quickly, he motioned to Luke, who was already standing with his hand on his gun. "No. Wait. You stand there, so you block the cell a little. Isaac, you throw that cover over yourself and try to be quiet." Harvey moved to the door and unlocked it, then went back to his desk. He snatched paperwork and acted like he was working on it. He mouthed to Luke that it was only Deacon outside. Luke nodded and leaned against the wall, as if relaxed.

Three thumping footfalls sounded and then Deacon flung the door open and stepped in as if he owned the place, which, in a way, he did. That didn't make Harvey any more receptive of his grandiose entrance.

"Well, Sheriff Harvey Roach. How the devil are you on this fine day?" He jerked off his hat and wiped the sweat off his face with a handkerchief that he immediately stuffed back into his pocket. "Lordy but it's stuffy in here. Why you got it all closed up for anyway?" He

grinned.

It was that same oily grin that he always gave Harvey; the one that made him want to punch the man. “Well, the dust was flying in here something awful and I’m trying to get some work done, in case you can’t see that.” Harvey piled the papers and slapped a hand on top of them. “What can I do for you, Mr. Owens?” Harvey grinned wide.

“For starters, you can tell me who you got in that cell.” He leaned and pointed around Luke.

Standing slowly, Harvey adjusted his holster, then his hat, and looked out the window. Deacon had arrived alone, and no one else had shown up. That was a good sign. “Why’s a prisoner of mine interest you so much?”

Luke stood straight; every muscle in his body seemed to be wound up tight. He expected Deacon’s men to come barging through the open front door at any second. His

senses heightened until it was almost painful.

“Well, because I believe you and this whelp went out and found Isaac Thomas, and that’s who’s in there. You wouldn’t sneak him back into town without telling anyone would you?” His oily grin fell flat, and he glared at Harvey.

Luke flipped his vest back, revealing his badge. “I’d be watching who you called a whelp, Mr. Owens. This whelp is a deputy of the law.”

Deacon’s eyes widened as he looked at Luke and then his badge and back to Harvey. “What’s the meaning of this, Harvey?” He pounded one meaty hand on the desk.

“I made him a deputy.” Harvey kept his demeanor neutral, but the fine hairs on his neck bristled as he stared levelly at Deacon.

Fuming, Deacon growled, “Who’s in that cell?”

His expression pulled lines into his face that made him resemble a dog; an angry and dangerous dog perhaps suffering from rabies. "Who do you think? It's Isaac. I've already wired the circuit judge and he's gonna be here soon enough for a fair trial."

"Fair trial! That murderer gets a fair trial?" He laughed loud, but it was humorless. "That's funny, Harvey." He pointed at the sheriff. "You've messed up for the last time." Spinning on his heel to face Luke, he added, "And, you missed our appointment today at noon, sonny boy, Deputy, whatever you prefer. But now that I've seen the badge, it's all the answer I need, ain't it?" He turned to storm out.

Luke was on him in a split-second, spinning him around and slamming him against the wall. He held him there with his forearm against Deacon's neck. "You ever threaten her again. I'll end you." Luke struggled to control himself, but he couldn't let Deacon go. He liked that the man was scared and that he had no choice but to listen

to him for once. “All your money won’t help you if you ever threaten her again. Understand?” He shoved his forearm harder into Deacon’s throat, making the man gasp for air.

“Luke! Let him go now. This ain’t how a *deputy of the law* handles matters.” Harvey reluctantly put his hand on Luke’s shoulder and gripped, pulling him back a bit.

Luke stepped away from Deacon, his arms shaking, and glared at him.

Deacon coughed and sputtered for a moment, being more dramatic than necessary. When he straightened up, he looked to Harvey. “I want this man fired, and I want to file a formal complaint. Let him and Isaac share that cell.”

Harvey, seeing that Luke was advancing on Deacon, stepped between them, his back to Luke. “Deacon, go on, now. You came to stir up trouble, don’t whine like a sissy just because you got what you asked for and didn’t

like it.”

His eyebrows shot nearly to his receding hairline. “You’ll pay for this. Both of you.”

Luke stepped around the sheriff. “Get outta here before we toss you in the cell for threatening our lives.” He wanted to add ‘you no good heathen’ but bit back on the words.

Deacon left in a flurry of curse words, spewing threats as he rode off.

Pushing his hat far back on his head, Harvey turned to Luke. “Well, that went over well, don’t you think?”

Both men laughed; Luke suspected it had more to do with being wound up so tight than with any hilarity of the situation. The situation was anything but funny.

From the cell, Isaac said, “He’ll send his boys back; you know he will. They’ll bust this

place wide open to get to me, Sheriff.” The terror was written all over his face.

Luke and the sheriff sobered quickly upon seeing that expression.

“That cell door ain’t locked, Isaac. If something goes wrong, you get outta here and don’t look back, keep going ’til you’re out of Colorado. You understand? Don’t go home, nothing; you just get as far away as you can.” Harvey took his seat again.

Isaac held onto the bars with his face pressed to them. “If they get me, you gotta promise me that you’ll take care of my Millie.” His voice broke, but his earnest eye contact with Luke did not.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Mr. Thomas; you’ll be fine. Me and the sheriff will keep you safe and *you* can look after Mill—Miss Thomas.” Luke’s heart did an odd little flip-flop in his chest at her name.



“Promise me.” His voice held no tremor this time. “I know you two ain’t seen eye to eye on something here recent, but Millie’s a good woman, just like her mother, and I want to know a good man will be keeping an eye on her if something happens to me.”

Swallowing over the lump in his throat, Luke shifted his weight from foot to foot and averted his gaze. The temperature seemed to rise several degrees all at once, and he couldn’t draw a deep breath. He thought Mr. Thomas had no idea how badly he wanted to be the man watching over Millie until the end of time. This, he decided, was not the time to even consider such a thing. A fight was coming to them, and the old man needed some reassurance; Luke would give it willingly, for many reasons—his feelings for Millie being at the top of the list.

“Yes, sir. I promise I’ll look after your daughter if things go bad.” Saying the words out loud, hearing the oath with his own ears, sent a spike through his chest. It solidified his future; he knew exactly what he would do when this messy business was over.

Isaac let go of the bars and backed up. He sat heavily on the cot and the springs squealed. "Thank you, Deputy Houston. You're a good man; one of the best I've met besides Sheriff Roach there." He smiled wanly at Luke, nodded, and lay on his side, looking exhausted.

Feeling as if there had been a new fire kindled inside him, Luke paced to the door and opened it. He stood in the light, warm breeze, considering Millie's safety again. The sheriff stepped around him to the porch.

"You can ride out and check on her, but I need you to come right back. Deacon's men will be here within two hours is my guess, if not sooner." Harvey had seen murder in Luke's eyes when Deacon had made his veiled threat. Luke would be useless if he was worried about the woman he so obviously loved.



# Chapter Twenty-

## Four

Wade, Carson, and Tad rode into town shortly after Deacon left. As they rode up in front of the jail station, Wade yelled, “Hey, Sheriff, we know you got Isaac in there. Trouble’s coming your way!”

Harvey and Luke stepped to the doorway, and Harvey motioned for Luke to remain inside while he stepped out to confront the men.

“You boys need to ride on and don’t cause no grief. The circuit judge will be here soon enough, and he can handle this all legal and fair.” Harvey’s heart set to its hard, slow thud just as it always did when he was faced with this sort of trouble.

Wade spat tobacco juice toward the porch. “Yeah, we’re gonna ride on; right on into town there and let everybody know. Ain’t you learned you don’t run this town, Sheriff? You just work for the man who does.” He laughed and Tad laughed with him.

Carson kept a serious expression. Harvey knew that of the three, Carson was the only one smart enough to understand the trouble that was about to unleash. He was the only one of the men just vile enough to understand and still want to cause it. He thrived on violence and never let his guard down. Harvey held his steady gaze for a moment, and then Carson tipped his hat at him, smiling. The hard look was still in his eyes.

Tad said, “You done picked the wrong side, Sheriff.”

Wade whooped and they rode off, Carson trailed leisurely behind them, holding Harvey’s gaze as he passed by.

From the doorway, Luke asked, “Why’d

you just let them ride on into town knowing what they're gonna do?"

"I can't stop them from going into town. Not by the law. And that's what I'm here to uphold, the law." Harvey moved to the other window and pulled open the drapes to follow the progress of Deacon's troublemakers.

Exasperated, Luke paced. "Good thing I didn't go riding off to check on Miss Thomas."

Nodding, Harvey watched as the trio stopped near The Saloon. "It won't be long now."

Luke sat in the chair and faced the other window to watch for anyone trying to slip past them toward Millie's place.

Harvey turned to him. "Don't get too relaxed."

"We know trouble's coming, might as well

save our energy 'til it gets here, Sheriff.” He tipped his hat back and stretched his legs out in front of him, getting as comfortable as the wooden chair allowed.

Isaac was at the bars again. “I saw Carson out there, Sheriff. Why didn’t you arrest him since you know he done the shooting?”

“I have to let Clyde testify to the truth, Isaac. After he testifies and signs a sworn statement, I can use that as a way to get Carson to turn on Deacon. I want to get the man who’s really responsible, not just his right-hand man.” Harvey remained at the window, watching for the first crowd to emerge from The Saloon.

“That’s great, but what if Carson and them other two get a mob to come in here guns blazing? Seems to me if you arrest Carson, that might slow them down a bit.” Isaac didn’t know if it would or not, but the thought of being at the mercy of a liquored-up mob who wanted to hang him didn’t appeal to him.

Luke spoke without turning around. "That would cause more trouble in the end and might not work like we plan."

After three hours of tense waiting, still nothing had happened, and Deacon's men remained in The Saloon. Harvey paced. "I didn't think it would take so long for them to start up."

Luke, who had moved to the open doorway again as soon as the sun began to dip westward, shook his head. "Me neither. They must be waiting on dark. They think we'll be less alert."

Isaac had fallen asleep on the cot. Though his cough had almost disappeared, and the fever was gone, he was still weak. Luke knew he wouldn't be able to defend himself against one man, let alone a mob.

"I want those lanterns burning high on the posts out there before it gets dark. I want to be able to see who's coming." He tossed a box of matches to Luke.



“You got it.” He slid the box into the pocket of his vest and stepped to the porch. It was still daylight and there was no need to light the lanterns for a while.

The evening air was cool and soothed his ill mood. Being stuck in the jail station, cramped up inside with no fresh air, no trees, no sky had been hard to deal with. Looking toward the Thomas homestead, Luke wondered if he would ever be able to settle down into any sort of normal life. Obviously, being cooped up in a tiny jail station with a sick man and a sheriff didn't compare to being in a house with the woman he loved, but would he be able to handle such a stationery life? Even now, he stood with a longing in his heart to ride away, sleep under the stars, go where nobody knew him.

But that would mean leaving Millie behind and possibly never seeing her again. If he chose to leave, he could ride back through

Haven Ridge every now and then, but what kind of life would that give Millie? *None that she deserves*, he thought.

No, he believed he would stay after the trial. After being deputized, he had begun to feel a certain amount of responsibility toward the town and the innocent, hardworking folks in it. Keeping the law and keeping them safe would give his life meaning.

The longing for travel would just have to be satisfied in some other way. He thought he needed Haven Ridge as much as it needed him.

Raucous laughter emanated from The Saloon, and Luke turned in that direction. A man stumbled out into the street, fell, and gained his feet after a few moments wallowing in the dust. He tried to mount a horse, fell again, and laid there for several seconds. Hoots and hollers from inside got him moving again. Once on his feet, he tried to mount the horse and barely caught himself. He gestured wildly at The Saloon and grabbed the horse's

reins. The man headed away from the town, and Luke, on foot and was soon lost in the growing shadows.

Lighting the lanterns, Luke listened to the tinny, rowdy piano music wafting from The Saloon. From the sound of it, the player was nigh on drunk, too. Luke figured the men would have a small mob good and drunk and ready to come to the jail in the hours just after sunset but before moonrise when they could still have the cover of darkness on their side. The lanterns, even burning high, would not push the full dark back far enough to see everyone in a crowd on the street.

He stepped back inside to retrieve his chair. It would be best to sit outside so he could watch all around.

Harvey sat at his desk, mulling over paperwork in the dim circle of light thrown by his own lantern. "How do you reckon Clyde's holding up down there?" He didn't look up.

"Hard to say. He seemed set on testifying

to the truth, though. I think what happened to Jacob Conley scared him and bothered his conscience. But with men like him, it's always hard to say for sure." Luke had seen hardened men crack under the slightest pressure from their peers. Then again, he had witnessed the wimpiest men around standing tall and proud, fearless, as they stood against their oppressors.

"Yeah. It's a crapshoot for sure." Harvey sighed and looked up, pushing the papers into a stack and placing them in a drawer. "I gave Isaac more medicine just to make sure whatever he had stays gone. He fell asleep again." He looked toward the darkened cell room.

"Let him get all the sleep he can now. When they start up, I'm sure he'll be good and awake." Luke took the chair out to the porch and heard gunshots from The Saloon.

Dropping the chair and reaching for his own gun, he spun in that direction. He could see five dark figures moving around in the street. The horses neighed and tried to pull

free of their tethers at the post. The men started toward the jail.

Sheriff Roach joined Luke on the porch. “How many?”

“Five that I could see. On foot and heading this way.” All his senses went on high alert again and he forgot about the chair.

“Don’t get trigger-happy. Just stay calm and let me talk to them first. There ain’t many men here who would shoot another, not even when they’re drunk.” Harvey’s heart kicked up the pace a little. As the five men staggered into view, his heart thudded hard and slowed again.

The first man had his gun drawn, but it hung limply at his side as he sneered up at the sheriff. “We hear you got Isaac, that murderin’ dog, in there, Sheriff. We want him.” The man wobbled, staggered, and spread his feet wide to keep a semblance of balance.

“Brady Allen, you put that gun right back in its holster or I’ll have my deputy arrest you right now. The rest of you, you’re all falling-down drunk and need to get home to your families.” Harvey pointed to each man in turn. “I know all of you. I know your families. Go on before you get in trouble. Isaac ain’t worth it, is he?”

Brady scoffed. He dropped his gun twice as he tried to holster it. “He should hang for murderin’ Sam!”

“And the judge will be here soon enough to decide Isaac’s fate. Y’all get hold of him before that, and the judge will be trying you for murder. Is that what you want?” Harvey stepped off the porch and down to their level, putting a hand on Brady’s shoulder.

After a moment, Brady gave him a droopy look and shook his head. “The judge’ll hang him when he hears what he done to Sam, won’t he?”

Harvey nodded. “Probably so, Brady. Now,

why don't you lead your friends outta town and back home? Go home and kiss your wives and get some sleep."

Brady laughed and clapped Harvey on the shoulder. "You know old Hoss' wife'll probably black his eye for comin' home drunk again."

At this, three of the others fell to laughing and had to hold onto each other to keep from falling. Hoss didn't laugh, he looked worried.

"Then one of you take him in for the night and he can face her in the morning when he's sober." Harvey moved away from Brady, who was already heading back the way he had come.

Luke watched in amazement as Harvey stepped back to the porch. Drunken laughter followed the little band of men all the way back to The Saloon where they eventually mounted up and rode off whooping and hollering.

“I would never have guessed that would go so easy. It’s good to know the people, I guess.” Luke righted the chair he had dropped earlier and laughed, shaking his head in disbelief.

“You gotta learn how to talk to people, especially when they’re dog drunk, tell them what they want to hear without lying to them.” Harvey grinned, feeling better about the situation. Maybe it wouldn’t be nearly as bad as they’d feared. He hoped the people of Haven Ridge weren’t easily swayed by Wade and the boys like they had been before. Since the last incident, they’d had time to think about it. Maybe they had realized they needed to stay out of it.

Luke didn’t know if he could ever learn to go back and forth with men like that. The way he had always seen it, if men come looking for trouble, they have their minds set. What the sheriff had done, Luke had never witnessed before. He let the men make their own assumptions about Isaac, the trial, and the verdict without trying to prove the man’s



innocence even once. Yet, he never lied to them.

Chuckling, he sat in his chair, facing the Thomas homestead. Settled living was a foreign concept for Luke, and the more he learned about it, the more foreign it seemed. His life as a bounty hunter had not been easy, but it had been simple.

Millie had taken the suspense as long as she could. Then, without any compunction at all, she had saddled Brandywine, grabbed her rifle and bullets, and headed toward Haven Ridge. The sheriff and Luke would have to forcibly remove her from the jail once she got there.

Riding harder than usual, especially after dark, she arrived at the jail station in record time. Luke stood peering from under the ring of lanterns at her, his hand on his gun.

Millie dismounted and grabbed her rifle. “Luke, it’s me, Millie.” She tethered Brandywine beside the building and took the

bullets from her saddlebag.

“Millie!” Luke tried to keep his voice down. “I thought you were staying home like we agreed.”

Millie squared her shoulders and hoisted her chin high. “We didn’t really agree on that, did we? *You* agreed and then forced it on me.” She breezed by him and toward the door.

Sheriff Roach met her and his look of surprise followed her as she stepped inside. Shaking his head, he looked hard at Luke. “I thought she promised she wasn’t gonna show up here!”

“Don’t speak like I’m not standing right here, sheriff. I came because Papa is all I’ve got in this world and I had to be here. I love him, Sheriff.” She set her ammunition on the desk and then carried the rifle toward the cell.

“Millie, this is too dangerous. You really shouldn’t be here.” Sheriff Roach followed

closely.

“And by your account, staying at home might have been just as dangerous.” She propped her rifle in the corner and reached for the cell door. Her Papa was lying on his side sleeping but began to rouse.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake!” Sheriff Roach had difficulty keeping his voice down. Knowing she wouldn’t listen to him, he turned to Luke and motioned him inside. “Will you please talk some sense into her?” He paced out the door to take up the watch.

Luke walked to the cell but didn’t enter. Isaac had sat up and hugged Millie. Their tearful reunion chipped away at his anger toward her. He would have done the same if he had been in her position.

She turned to Luke and wiped her tears. “If you’re here to scold me, you can just toss it out the window. I’m here and I’m staying with my father.”

“You could get shot, Millie. This isn’t a place for a woman.” Luke tried to look calmly at her, but his insides were doing somersaults.

“I’d rather die defending my father as to live without him.” She stood and walked out of the cell, recalling how Luke had tried to warn her, had cared for her sick father, all the times he had proven himself a gentleman, and she tiptoed, giving him a light peck on the cheek. “Thank you for your concern, Luke, and for all you’ve done for us.”

Shocked by her kiss, Luke could only nod. After a moment’s pause to recover, he said, “I’m serious about this being dangerous, though. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

She nodded solemnly. “For better or worse, I’m here to see it through.”

Proud of her for being so strong and independent, he was still exasperated. “I wish

you had stayed home, though.”

Isaac nodded agreement. “Me, too, Millie.”

Directing her attention to Luke, she said, “Don’t tell me, that given the opportunity, you wouldn’t do the same.” She put her hands on her hips and gave him a stern expression.

“Yeah, I would have. Gladly.” He turned to the door and then back to her, huffing in frustration. “But I’m a man. It’s different.”

“Luke Houston, don’t you *ever* say that to me again. Not about anything.” She spun on her heel and sat with her father for a split-second and was back up again. “You’re saying that if my name was Michael instead of Millie, you wouldn’t have a problem with my being here?”

Grinning, he looked to the floor. “Kinda.”

“Guess you better call me Michael until

this is all over, then.” Whirling again, she thumped down onto the corner of the cot, eyeing him hotly. Just when she thought she could like him, maybe even love him, he had to go and make her mad again. And he could do it so quickly.

“Fine. *Michael*. Keep your voice down and your ears open.” Frustrated, Luke returned to the porch.

Sheriff Roach sat in his chair with a wide, silent grin on his face, looking toward The Saloon.

“What’s that grin about?” Luke propped against a pole and looked toward the other end of town where everything was dark and still.

“Just glad to see you two can compromise.” He nearly laughed in spite of the seriousness of the situation. *If they could see themselves, they’d laugh too*, he thought.

Another group of men exited The Saloon. They didn't stagger, whoop, holler, or mount-up. They walked steadily toward the jail. The fine hairs on Harvey's neck prickled. Those men were the dangerous ones.

Standing quickly, he counted eight figures in the deepening darkness. The sun had gone behind the mountain and the moon wasn't up.

Hearing the sheriff stand, Luke turned and saw the approaching group of men. They looked like they meant business. His palms sweated and his gut tightened.

Harvey gave Luke a sideways look. "This is where it gets dangerous."

"Yeah. They don't look drunk." Luke adjusted his holster and his hat. "You want me to talk to them?" He had no doubt if a gunfight broke out, he could take most of them. He wasn't so sure how the sheriff would fare in a fight so uneven.

“Nah. They can’t sense any fear, or they’ll be like a pack of wolves. They’ll tear us apart and take him for sure. Now that she’s in there, it’s doubly dangerous.” Harvey adjusted his holster.

“But I can take them if it comes to that. It’s kinda what I’ve been doing my whole life.” Luke stood his ground.

“Yeah? And just how many gunfights have you been in?” Harvey gave him a withering look.

Taken aback, Luke blinked at the sheriff. “A few. And I’m still standing.”

“Good, then stand in front of the door. Close it while you’re at it.” Harvey motioned at the door and then turned back to the men who approached silently.

Luke poked his head inside. “Heads up. We got company looks like trouble.” He closed the door and stood in the center of the porch,



not put off by the sheriff's cutting remark.

"Evenin' gentlemen." Harvey positioned himself in front of the window to block any clear shot they might have inside.

The lead man, who Harvey didn't recognize, nodded. "Evenin'. You have Isaac Thomas in there."

It wasn't a question. Harvey nodded once. "I do."

"I hear he's a murderer and the fine folks of Haven Ridge want him strung up. Seems you've been slackin' in your duties to them."

The other men stood in cold silence behind him. Harvey could only pick out one man he knew. Deacon's man known only as Boomer. He stood back a good pace from the light.

"My duties don't include allowing

vigilante justice. Best y'all break it up and move on out. We don't want any trouble." Harvey stood his ground and was careful not to show any emotion that could be construed as fear.

The lead man rested his hand on his pistol and squinted against the light from the lanterns.

Luke put his hand on his pistol and watched as the other men fanned out just outside the circle of dim light. The lanterns hindered his sight, but he thought he recognized Wade and Carson in the group, and possibly Tad. His adrenaline caused his heart to thud dully in his ears and tensed his arms.

Harvey held out his left hand in a wait gesture. "Now, hold on. You don't want to do this, mister."

"You're the ones outnumbered." He flexed his fingers.

Harvey tried to see the other men, but the glare from the lanterns made it almost impossible. He saw Wade, Carson, Tad, and Boomer. The other three he couldn't see clearly enough to discern if they were Deacon's or not, but he believed they were.

The man moved to draw, and Harvey shot him in the thigh. As he swung his pistol in the direction of the others, but before he could shoot, Luke fired off six rapid-fire shots. Six men dropped to the ground, groaning. Boomer stood with both hands in the air. He stepped into the light.

"Don't shoot, Sheriff! I ain't armed. Don't shoot!" Boomer's arms shook and his eyes were wild.

"Get down, Boomer. Luke, watch him." Harvey hopped off the porch and kicked the pistol away from the man he had shot in the thigh. "What's your name?"

"John Buck." He held his thigh with both hands, grimacing as blood poured from the

wound.

“What’s your business in all this? Deacon hire you?” Harvey moved a step closer, quickly glancing at the others on the ground groaning and holding their own wounds.

The man laughed. “Something like that.”

The sheriff shook his head. “You work for Deacon?”

He didn’t answer, only glared up at Harvey.

Wade moaned and said, “We need a doctor, Sheriff. You can’t let us sit here and bleed to death.”

Scoffing, Luke said, “You ain’t going to bleed to death.”

The sheriff looked across the way to the

doc's office. There was light in the windows downstairs. "Well, since you saw fit to cause a ruckus and wake the doctor, you can drag yourselves over there and let him patch you up. You'll owe him, and you can't leave town now. You'll be under arrest for trying to shoot me and my deputy. Reckon how your boss will like that?"

Harvey talked to Doc Renfro while the wounded men made their way to his porch. Luke escorted them inside and Harvey went back to the station, dragging Boomer with him. He made him sit in the dirt and tied his hands to a post. He peeked inside and saw that Millie and Isaac were fine, scared but fine. He sat in his chair, hoping the night's trouble was over.

When the doctor had finished removing lead and patching up the men, Luke took them to the side of the jail station. He shackled them and tethered them two to each porch post.

John Buck said, "You can't leave us out

here all night.”

Grinning, Luke tipped his hat at the man. “I won’t leave you out here all night. You’ll be out here until the circuit judge arrives. You’ll likely be out here two nights and two days.”

“They’re all Deacon’s men, Sheriff.” Luke reloaded the pistol.

“I figured as much. Mr. Buck must be a new hire.” Harvey nodded toward the man.

Luke surveyed them all from the porch. Murderous mean, each and every one of them. He could see it in their eyes, but Carson was different. He looked as if he *enjoyed* the murder and mayhem he caused. Luke figured that getting paid to do Deacon’s dirty work had probably been a dream come true for Carson.



# Chapter Twenty-

## Five

Luke had opted to remain awake through the night, letting the sheriff get some much-needed rest. Deacon's men moaned and groaned, some fell asleep, but they didn't cause any more trouble. Carson, however, remained vigilant, watchful, silent. Luke worried that he would figure a way to escape and take his revenge. Without a conscience, he was a dangerous man. Luke kept an eye on him.

Well before sunrise, the sheriff woke and joined Luke on the porch. He looked over the injured gang members and shook his head. He had only slept for about two hours, and that wasn't restful. Stiff and achy, he stretched. "Anything interesting while I was out?"

"Didn't even see anybody else leave The



Saloon. Bellyaching from this crew is about all the noise there was.” Luke nodded toward Deacon’s men.

“It’s time for my walkabout. I’ll check things over down that way.” He moved his eyes toward The Saloon.

“You think it’s wise to go out alone this morning?” Luke hadn’t seen anybody, but that didn’t mean they weren’t holed up in The Saloon, planning their next attack.

“I’ll keep a sharp eye out. The way you handled that gun last night, I’m pretty sure you’ll be okay ’til I get back. Besides, you have *Michael* in there to help watch your back.” Harvey grinned at Luke.

Harvey walked toward The Saloon, keeping closer to buildings than normal and watching the deeper shadows more intently. It seemed the only noise was coming from The Saloon. Instead of walking up to the batwings, as he normally would have done, Harvey stepped to the side of the building and peered

through a window.

The dirty glass was difficult to see through, but it seemed like business as usual on first glance. Men passed out at the poker tables, some still holding cards, and a couple of patrons at the bar who looked like they were ready to pass out.

Their conversation was inaudible, and Harvey moved around to the other side of the building. Looking through the cleaner window on that side, he could see Clyde at the bar. Harvey knew the barkeep had to be exhausted, but he hoped Clyde would overhear something useful.

Since all looked peaceful enough for the moment, Harvey finished his walkabout, going at it fast until he was back at the jail station. The sun had crested over the mountain as he approached. Doc Renfro was tending to the wounded men again and lecturing Luke that they needed better accommodations.

Doc Renfro was a good man, but

sometimes Harvey wondered about him. He knew what the men had done to get shot, and he knew the injuries could have been much worse, yet he was concerned about them sitting in the dirt for a day.

Harvey had no such worries. They could sit there for a week for all he cared. He wouldn't dare put them in the cell with Isaac. Nor would he take Isaac out and risk Wade's men getting ahold of him.

"Hey, Doc! How goes it this morning?" Harvey propped against the side of the station.

The wiry man adjusted his glasses and shook his head as he finished putting a clean bandage on one of the wounded men. "Sheriff, it ain't right. These men are injured. They shouldn't sit out in the blowing dirt and heat all day. What if the wounds become infected?"

"Doc, don't you worry about these men. I daresay they've been through far worse and fared just fine. There ain't anywhere to put them, and I bet you don't want to open your

own house to them. Do you?" He raised his eyebrows at the doctor.

Fiddling with his glasses and sputtering a response that Harvey couldn't make out, the doctor moved to John Buck. Without looking at the sheriff, he said, "Fine. But it'll be more work on me if they acquire infections from this. And I doubt if I'll be getting any sort of reimbursement for my work." He reached for the bandage around John's thigh and the man swatted his hand away roughly.

"Leave it, Doc." John eyed him hatefully.

"But you need a clean dressing on it." The doctor looked nervously from John to the sheriff and back.

"I said, leave it. I don't need you poking and prodding and making it worse. I'm fine." John laid his hand over the bloody bandage.

"Come on, Doc. You have other patients to tend to, I'm sure. Leave these gentlemen be for

now. And, yes, you will be reimbursed. It's going to come from whatever money or goods are seized from them when the judge gets here." Harvey grinned and clapped the doctor on the back, urging him to head for his office.

"What are we going to do about feeding all of them?" Luke stood and stretched.

"Maisy's usually prepares a meal a day for the prisoners, but I've never had to feed a whole gang. Why don't you head there and let them know that we need a whole pot of beans and a big cake of cornbread? Skirt out behind the buildings so nobody sees you're alone, just to be safe. Get you a couple hours of sleep while you're there and bring the food back with you."

Hesitantly, Luke agreed. He would leave his window open so any ruckus would wake him, but he felt that things had calmed for the time. Twenty minutes later, he sat in the chair by the window and looked out over the street. The bustle of activity gave credence to the idea that the storm had passed, or at least

stalled out.

Washing up and changing into clean clothes, Luke sat in the chair a little longer. The cooling breeze soothed him, and he dozed. Sometime later, loud and rowdy laughter from the street woke him with a start.

Another of Deacon's men stood outside The Saloon with a small group. He spoke to them and then they all laughed again. The group took off on their horses and headed out of town. Deacon's man watched them from the street for a moment before going back inside.

Luke pulled on his boots. The storm was brewing again, and he didn't want to be caught unprepared. Checking the time, he saw that it was only eight-thirty. The same man emerged from The Saloon with another small group of men. They laughed and then the men rode out toward the schoolhouse.

The man then mounted up and walked his horse between the buildings, pointed in the direction of Deacon's ranch.

Trying to figure what they had planned, he looked in the three different directions and tried to stitch together a scenario. He couldn't. Looking back to The Saloon, he saw Clyde standing just behind the batwings. He motioned at Luke and pointed to the livery, then he held up five fingers and pointed to his pocket watch.

Luke nodded. He headed to the livery and waited just inside. Clyde came in shortly after, looking more exhausted and more paranoid than ever.

“What is it, Clyde?” Luke kept his voice low.

“Deacon's boys are coming for Carson and his crew at five this evening. They're planning on killing you and the sheriff and stringing Isaac up in the big tree next to the schoolhouse. Y'all need to run, Luke.” Clyde was sweating and his eyes were shot through with red streaks.

Luke shook his head. "No. We can't let these outlaws have the upper hand. If the sheriff starts running, he'll never be sheriff again and Haven Ridge will never be safe." He thought of Millie and Isaac. He would need to figure out how to get her to leave for her own safety.

Clyde nodded, looking gravely at the ground. "Well, I just thought you two should know. I'm heading to get some sleep. Been up all night with them in there trying to organize a mob." Clyde left in a hurry, not looking back.

Luke made his way to the kitchen at Maisy's. The cornbread had just been laid in a basket. He thanked the woman and took the food back to the jail station, walking up the street instead of behind buildings. Deacon's men were gone, so he didn't see any need to hide. Hiding wasn't something he liked doing, anyway. He liked to face trouble head-on.

Harvey gave Isaac a bowl of beans and some cornbread. Millie insisted on getting her



own. Luke took some and was glad to have them for a change from the cheese and hard bread.

There were two wooden bowls and a tin cup to serve seven men from. Harvey filled the bowls with beans and handed one to the men on each end. After handing one to John Buck, he said, "Share or not. I don't care either way." The cornbread was laid out on cheesecloth for them to divide.

Inside, Luke told the sheriff what Clyde had said. "You think it's true?"

Harvey mulled it over. "Could be. Clyde wouldn't lie about it, but they might have fed him bad information on purpose, knowing he would tell us."

Nodding, Luke finished his food. He liked how the sheriff thought. It matched the way he thought. He was looking at all angles and all possibilities.

Millie returned her empty bowl. “And maybe it is the truth. I know they’re meaner than rattlesnakes, but none of them strike me as smart enough to make up such a plan just to throw us off.”

Luke thumped his bowl down on the desk. “Us? No, there’s no *us*, Millie. This game has gone far enough, and you need to go back home. I’m serious.”

Harvey sighed and lowered his gaze, knowing what was coming.

Millie turned on him. “I told you I’m here to see it through, no matter the outcome. What are you gonna do? Throw me out? Physically carry me back home?”

“Maybe. If it comes to that, I just might.” Luke felt all the wind go out of his sails.

Laughing, she shook her head. “No, you wouldn’t.” She sashayed back into the cell with her father, leaving the door open and

stared back at Luke defiantly.

Isaac looked down at the floor, a smile on his face. *They'll be married before the year's out*, he thought and stifled a chuckle. They were both headstrong, and they seemed to feed off each other's energy, especially when they were arguing.

Harvey and Isaac exchanged a knowing glance and nodded to one another. Harvey thought Millie and Luke would make a dandy couple. Each of them as fiery and stubborn as the other. Each set in their own way. But when they weren't arguing, he had witnessed the love in their eyes for each other, too. It was as deep as their arguing was heated.

Finally, after a very long and stubborn silence, Millie cleared her throat. "I have a suggestion. Deacon's men will come for the crew outside. Why don't Papa and I go home before they get here?" She smiled.

Isaac spoke up. "Because they'll likely have the way home covered by someone.

We're stuck here, Millie. Least 'til the trial's over." He looked questioningly at Luke for confirmation and Luke nodded.

Millie huffed, resigning herself to another indefinite period of waiting. She didn't know how outlaws and miscreants could live that way. It was hard on her nerves; she was restless, but there was nothing to do for it except *wait*.

The rest of the day was quiet. Deacon's men didn't return, and by the time Luke was doling out beans for an early evening meal, he had begun to think they wouldn't return at all.

Smiling and seeming relaxed, the sheriff pushed his hat back and stood by the chair on the porch. He looked up the street and then down it one last time. "Well, it all looks quiet still. Maybe somebody had a stroke of common sense and they're not coming. With the judge arriving in the morning on the first coach, it would be wise of them to avoid trouble." He sat in the chair, feeling refreshed from the walk; and from the absence of

Deacon's men.

Luke had no such easy feeling; it was more a sense of impending doom. It was going to happen; he just didn't know when. "I don't think they're that smart, Sheriff. They'll be here."

Stepping back onto the porch, Luke dusted his hands against his pants and reached up to adjust his hat when a bullet whizzed by his head and splinters shot from the wall above the sheriff's head.

Inside, Millie squawked in surprise and ran for her gun. Returning to the cell, her father pulled her roughly down to the floor. "Stay low, Millie!"

Luke ducked and drew his gun as he spun in the direction the bullet came from. The sheriff rolled off the chair into a squatting position with the door to his back. Gun in hand, he scoured the street toward his house for the shooter.

Another bullet zinged just above their heads and slammed into the door, flinging it open. Luke lunged through the open door, the sheriff dove inside, and another bullet hit the doorjamb, sending wood shrapnel in all directions.

Deacon's men hunkered in the dirt whooping and hollering. They were yelling for the shooter to take out the lawmen. Their noise was loud enough to muffle the sounds of approaching horses.

Luke poked his head up into the window and ducked again. "There's three on horses. Another one of Deacon's men is at the head of the pack. There's at least four on foot. I'm sure they're all his men."

Harvey nodded. "Looks like they're a mite earlier than five." He had thought they might try to take them by surprise, but he had honestly expected them to use the cover of darkness to do their dirty work.

Luke stood at the edge of the window near the corner of the room and peered behind the curtain to see the man on horseback and two men on foot flanking him. He tossed a knife toward John Buck and fired a shot at the window where Luke stood. The sheriff covered his head as glass rained down on him, and then he moved to the corner with Luke and stood.

“They’re circling around. Millie, stay down with Isaac,” Luke warned.

Ducking under the windows, the sheriff made a run for Isaac’s cell. “You two get in that corner and don’t move!” He pointed to the back wall of the cell

Isaac did as he was told, terrified beyond his own imaginings. He had never been shot at before and he didn’t want to die by being shot up in a jail. And he definitely didn’t want his daughter being shot. Trembling, he tried to make himself small and pulled Millie down beside him. The barred window was high enough that nobody could see inside unless

they were on horseback, and then only if they were tall. Isaac saw a gun poke between the bars as the sheriff climbed onto the cot.

“Look out, Sheriff!” He yelled, pointing to the gun.

Harvey shunted to the side and the pistol fired, missing him by inches and splitting a floorboard in the cell. He snatched the pistol from between the bars and the man on the other end cursed and squeezed off another shot. That one went into the ceiling. Harvey wrested the gun from the man’s hand.

“Can you shoot, Isaac?” Harvey looked to the cowering man in the corner and felt sorry for him.

“No! Just a rifle.” Isaac answered in a rattling voice on the verge of breaking.

“I can shoot, Sheriff. He’s in no shape to.” Millie swung her gun up to her shoulder and aimed toward the cell door.



A volley of shots rang through the office, more glass shattered, then Harvey heard Luke returning fire. He ran out of the cell and stood by the door, opening it only a fraction of an inch. He was shocked to see that Tad and Boomer were on horses. The rest of the men hobbled toward the end of town.

Luke shot at Wade and hit him in the side. Wade dropped his pistol and crumpled over the saddle horn yelling and turned his horse toward Deacon's ranch. The other two on horses trained their guns on Luke's window and fired several rounds.

Millie bit her lower lip and squeezed her eyes shut, praying for courage. The gunshots were loud, and the scene was chaos compared to the life she was used to. Her heart had stopped beating. Instead, it fluttered like bird wings in her chest.

*Just where I wanted you,* he thought as the horses edged closer to the porch. He ran in front of the window, firing at the men as he

went. Four shots fired, and he was sure he hit both men on foot and one on horseback. The return fire was less damaging than before. Sweating, he grinned at the sheriff. Seeing that he was okay, Luke turned to Millie. "Y'all okay back there?"

Millie nodded. "Yes. Are they gone?"

"There's at least one more on foot and one more on a horse. I got Wade in the side. He'll have to ride away to get patched up soon." Luke turned back to the sheriff.

The sheriff nodded.

Luke peeked out the window quickly, pulling his head back. "Got the other rider." He ran by the window and shot at the rider who fired as soon as he saw Luke. The bullet grazed his shoulder and knocked over the chair behind the desk.

Luke groaned and hit the wall hard. He had hit the rider. He hadn't expected to be

injured himself, though. He squatted in the corner and inspected the wound.

“Luke! Luke, are you okay?” Millie screamed, frantic at the sight of Luke being shot. Her father gripped her arm hard and she nearly dragged him off the floor.

“Down, Millie!” Her father’s voice broke through her panic and she squatted by him.

“How bad is it?” the sheriff asked.

“Grazed me. Took off a little hide.” He reloaded his guns and took several deep breaths. He chanced another look.

“Luke, stay down, you’re hit,” Millie yelled at him. Why was he so stubborn? “Stop it before you get shot in the head, Luke!” Her body had gone numb with fear. The reality that she could lose her father and Luke had hit her hard.

The rider Luke had just shot in the arm took off toward Deacon's ranch, too. He whipped the horse's hindquarters, spurring it on faster. Two on foot ran toward the back of the jail and one rider followed them.

"Two going around back. Millie, watch the window!" Luke looked to her and saw that she was in shock; her face was pale, and her eyes were large, and she seemed locked up as she stared at him.

A gun appeared between the bars on the window. Luke yelled, "The window!"

Millie swung in that direction, bringing the gun up at the same time. Without pause, she shot at the hand. A man screamed outside, and the gun bounced off the cot onto the floor. The fact that she had just shot a man was only flat, meaningless knowledge at that point. She thought she was beyond being shocked or scared anymore.

Luke peeked out the window, searching for the two on foot. He couldn't see them. He

scanned out the other window and was met with gunfire from only one man. He returned cover fire as he crossed that window and moved toward the cell.

“One’s missing. Watch for Isaac.” Luke heard glass shatter and felt the ripping, burning pain of another bullet tearing into his arm near his elbow. He grabbed the wound and stumbled to the floor, landing hard.

Cradling the wounded arm against his stomach, he grimaced and applied pressure, not wanting to see how bad it was.

“Luke?” Isaac scurried from his cell, Millie on his heels, to Luke. “Where are ya hit?”

The sheriff moved to the first window, looking out for anyone. Then he moved to the other window and saw nobody there, either. “All right, Luke?”

“I’ve been better, but I’ll live.” He accepted Isaac’s help to stand even though he

didn't really need it. "Thanks."

"Are they gone?" Millie resembled a frightened rabbit, but she wasn't crying. She set her gun against the wall and applied pressure to Luke's wound.

"I don't see anybody out there, but that don't mean they're gone." Harvey reloaded his pistol and eased the door open a little at a time until the porch and street were in full view. No movement anywhere. He stepped back in and holstered his gun, shutting and locking the door so he could check on Luke's wounds.

Harvey used his knife and cut the sleeve from Luke's shirt. "I hope you have another. This one's ruined."

"Plenty of them. But this was my nicest one." Luke grinned.

Looking from the sheriff to Luke in disbelief at their badly timed humor, Millie

snatched the removed sleeve and used it as a makeshift bandage around his elbow. She was none too gentle when she tightened it. “What’s wrong with you? Laughing at a time like this?”

Her eyes were angry. Luke shook his head. She was scared mad, he thought. “It’s okay. Just burns like a hot poker.” He even extended his arm once to show her.

She shook her head and grabbed her gun, still glaring at him.

Isaac shook his head. “You’re bleeding pretty bad.”

Harvey nodded. “Yeah, but he’ll be fine.” He patted Isaac’s shoulder.

“You smell something burning?” Isaac sniffed the air like a dog.

Luke immediately looked to the stove. It

hadn't been used in days and he didn't know how it could have anything burning inside it. Then it hit him. He was on his feet instantly. "They're burning the building!"





# Chapter Twenty-Six

Without thinking, Luke launched himself out the door and off the porch. As he rounded the corner, the man who had lit the torch to the jail's back wall took off toward the schoolhouse, and Luke gave chase.

“Stop running!” His hat flew from his head.

The man glanced over his shoulder when the schoolhouse was coming into view. Luke saw the expression. The man didn't look scared. He was grinning. He wasn't worried about Luke catching him. He was just making sure Luke was following him. Luke slowed to a trot, following his gut instinct that there was a trap at the schoolhouse.

The man looked back again and stopped running. He pulled his vest open. “I ain't armed, Deputy. Come and get me!” He motioned with both hands as he panted for

breath and backed toward the schoolhouse.

There were horses behind the building, and Deacon's was at the stand of trees far back. Luke saw movement and instinctively ducked. A shot rang out and he scrambled back to his feet. He was in the open without shelter of any kind. He was sure the shot had come from Deacon on his horse.

As he ran, more shots rang out and a few came close to him. He cut behind a building and kept running toward the jail station. If there was a trap there, they might have ambushed the jail again from the other side.

The sheriff was using Isaac's cot blanket to put out the fire that was trying to crawl up the back wall. Luke, out of breath, his arm throbbing, slowed to a fast walk and approached the sheriff.

"There was a trap at the schoolhouse. They were expecting one of us to chase that man." His breathing was ragged, and his lungs burned.

The sheriff beat out the last of the little blaze and turned to Luke. "Inside."

Luke didn't argue, but he would much rather have remained outside to be able to see the oncoming attack before the men were on top of the jail again. "Deacon was with them. I don't know how many, but I saw a bunch of horses behind the schoolhouse. Wade's mob was just to wear us down and use up our ammo." His heart felt like the hooves of a runaway horse.

The sheriff laid out the guns they had taken from John Buck and his gang the night before. Then he opened the gun cabinet by the stove and took out two rifles. "We'll load 'em all and hold them off as long as we can." He stood in front of Luke and lowered his voice. "Shoot to kill from here on out." He raised his eyebrows and waited for a response. It wasn't an ideal order to be giving, but under the circumstances, he knew it was necessary if they expected to survive.

Luke held his gaze for a moment and then nodded solemnly. They loaded all the pistols and laid them evenly across the desk. Luke loaded both rifles and propped them by the stove. Harvey dragged the heavy desk and positioned it in the center of the room with a short side facing the door, and the other facing Isaac's cell.

Luke surveyed the strategic layout. It was good. The knee hole faced the window looking out toward The Saloon. "Isaac, you and Millie sit here in the corner where the rifles are. You'll be protected by the stove and the desk."

Isaac moved immediately and sat down, drawing his knees up toward his chest and wrapping his arms around them. Millie followed but only squatted down on one knee, keeping her gun at shoulder level.

Harvey nodded. "And keep your head down. You're safer there than in that cell. Luke, you stand between them and the desk and I'll stand here at the end."

Handing Millie a box of ammo, Luke said, "You can reload. When I hand you a gun, you reload it and lay it on top of the stove."

She moved and slammed the ammo on the desk. "I'll be busy shooting." She moved back to her place by her father.

*Stubborn woman! We'll never get along.* Luke thought as he handed the box to her father. "Can you reload, Mr. Thomas?"

Nodding, Isaac said, "I just can't shoot nothing but a rifle." He offered a crooked grin that faltered.

"That's fine. Leave the shootin' to us." Luke stretched his right arm, making the wound at his elbow throb worse. He worked it until the stiffness subsided.

They stayed in their places for several minutes, each straining to hear sounds of approaching trouble, but none came. After ten minutes, Luke checked the time. Ten 'til five.

He arched sweat from his forehead and wished he had his hat.

Five more minutes passed, and the sheriff walked to the window facing The Saloon, his boots crunching the shards of broken glass. Using the butt of his gun, he cleared the little bit of jagged glass remaining in the bottom panes. He looked as far toward the schoolhouse as he could see, which wasn't far, and he saw nobody. The Saloon side was devoid of movement, too. Likely, the townsfolk had heard the gunshots and took cover inside the businesses. The window facing Doc Renfro's and the path to the Thomas homestead was clear.

Turning back to Luke, the sheriff shrugged. "Nobody. Nothing's moving out there. I'm going to check toward the back from the porch."

Before Luke could protest, Harvey was out the door. Peering cautiously around the corner, he saw nothing, but he heard the hoofbeats of several horses. They were headed

toward him. The first person to come into view was Deacon Owens. His tan duster and twenty-gallon hat made him visible long before the others were.

Hurrying inside, he shut and locked the door. "On their way. Deacon's riding lead. That's unlike him."

Luke braced as the horses ran along both sides of the jail station. No one fired, so he held fast.

Deacon yelled from the street. "Send him out, Sheriff. Send Isaac Thomas on out here, and we'll leave all nice and peaceful like."

Exchanging a look with Luke, Harvey yelled back, "Not gonna happen, Mr. Owens. You know I can't do it."

"Are you sure?" Deacon followed that with an evil laugh.



“Positive!” Harvey kept his eye on the men he could see out the saloon-facing window. His pistols were cocked, and his fingers were on the triggers. He was ready to protect Isaac as long as he could. He just hoped it was long enough for the man to get a fair trial with the truthful testimony of Clyde included.

“Last chance, Sheriff. I’m riding back home. I can’t be responsible for what these boys do if I’m not here. They’re off-duty at the ranch; this is their free time, you know.” A ripple of laughter rolled through the mob.

Harvey nodded to Luke. Luke nodded back.

Deacon said, “I’m gone, then. Have it your way! Hyah!” The sound of retreating hoofbeats sounded and then silence, save the nervous prancing of a few horses.

Luke had a good view of the saloon-side window. The men drew their guns and aimed at the busted glass. Someone yelled a

command.

Luke yelled, “Down!” He dropped to his knee and turned toward Millie, covering her with his body and both arms. She jumped and screamed a few times as bullets hit the wall just above their heads.

The men stared at each other as bullets riddled the room. When the shooting stopped, the gunpowder hung like fog around the shooters, slowly drifting west.

Harvey and Luke stood simultaneously. Luke fired toward the saloon-side window and Harvey toward the street.

Three men fell from their saddles as Luke fired. He handed the empty pistol to Isaac. He had to tap the old man’s arm hard to get him to open his eyes. “Load her up, Isaac!”

Harvey slid his empty pistol toward Luke, and he handed it to Isaac, too.

Fumbling with the ammunition, Isaac could barely breathe. His fingers were as numb as the rest of him. A high-pitched ringing had replaced all other sounds in his ears. After dropping several bullets, he finally succeeded in reloading the first gun. When the shooting started again, he dropped the second pistol and the box of ammo, and he put his arms over his head.

Luke saw Harvey grab his shoulder and curl up in pain. “How bad?” He yelled to be heard. The gunshots were deafening in the small jail.

Harvey shook his head and gave Luke a thumbs-up. The bullet had gone straight through and seemed to have missed anything very important. It was painful and bleeding badly, but Harvey had suffered much worse wounds in his past. The arm was nearly useless, though, as he couldn’t raise it more than a foot from his side.

Luke put two pistols in his holsters,

grabbed two from the desk and made a run on the street window. When the two pistols were empty, he tossed them out to the sides and grabbed the ones he had holstered, firing them rapidly at the riders.

Millie stood in the corner and fired out the street window, walking toward it in stiff, jerky motions. Logical thought had fled, and she just wanted to make them stop shooting. She couldn't take it. Those men, those terrible men were trying to kill her father and Luke and she couldn't let them do it. She had to make them stop.

Harvey, stunned, broke his paralysis and headed for the other window, firing at the riders there as fast as he could. "Millie, get back!"

"No." She kept firing and moving toward the window.

Luke ducked and rolled toward the desk, grabbing another gun. Seeing Millie, Luke panicked. "Millie! Get down!" She didn't hear

him.

Charging the door, Luke flung it wide and shot at the retreating riders. When it sank in that they were no longer returning fire, he stopped and gawked at them as they beat their horses to run faster and faster. They were heading out of town, probably toward Deacon's ranch.

Millie had made her way to the window and still squeezed the trigger of her rifle even though there were no bullets left in it. Luke rushed to her and put an arm around her, easing the rifle from her grasp. "Come on, let's sit down."

The sheriff ran to right the overturned chair and Millie sat. It was as if she didn't see or hear him, and Luke worried that she might faint.

He turned to the sheriff, dumbfounded. "What happened to the riders?" He motioned for Isaac to stand with Millie.

Harvey pointed out the window. "Seems that somebody ordered them to leave."

Luke saw the lone rider heading away from them. He was a heavysset man with light hair and no hat. "Hey, I've seen him at the general store."

"Yep, that's Mr. Bertrand Mercer. He hollered at one of the men on this side, then left in a hurry. That man whistled and gave the others the round-up signal." Harvey looked at the ruin of his jail station in exasperation.

Luke moved to Isaac and Millie. "It's over. Least we think it is. They're gone."

"We don't have a choice but to move you, Isaac. It obviously ain't safe here anymore." Harvey looked out the door and toward The Saloon. Grinning, he turned back to Luke. "Maybe that's why they all took off." He pointed to the big man walking up the middle

of the street.

“That’s one big fella. Who is he?” Luke took in the man’s long, powerful strides and the broadness of his square shoulders.

“That would be our district judge. A fella by the name of Robert Stromberg. Toughest judge this side of the Mississippi River.” Harvey was glad to see the judge.

“He’s the biggest judge I’ve ever seen.” Luke chuckled and cradled his throbbing elbow again, reminding himself to keep it still as possible.





# Chapter Twenty-

## Seven

Judge Stromberg approached the ruined jail station with a stoic expression on his broad face. Harvey met him in front of the porch. “I take it the retreating band of outlaws I just saw are responsible for this?” Judge Stromberg pointed to the jail station.

“Yes, sir. We’ve fended off three attacks since last evening. Seems the mob is set on hanging Isaac Thomas instead of waiting for the trial.” Harvey’s wound pounded in time with his heartbeat and he looked toward Doc Renfro’s office. The blinds were pulled and there was no sign of the good doctor.

“You’re shot.” The judge nodded toward Harvey’s shoulder.

“Yeah. Seems that way. I’ll get the doctor to patch me up shortly. My deputy’s wounded, too.” Harvey cocked his head toward the jail station.

“And the prisoner?” The judge started for the door.

“Safe in there.” Harvey followed.

Stepping inside, the judge scowled at the ruined station and the female. He shook his head. “I’ll watch the prisoner; you and your deputy go get patched up and come back here. And who is she and why is she here?”

Millie blinked at Judge Stromberg, and in a flat tone, stated, “I’m Millie Thomas; Isaac Thomas is my father. I’m here because I wanted to make sure he was safe.”

“Well, seems you stepped into quite a situation, Miss Thomas. I’d suggest getting outta here and going somewhere safe.” He nodded at her.

She shook her head. "I'm not leaving town without my father."

"That will all depend on the outcome of the trial tomorrow, young lady." Stromberg crossed his arms.

"Then I'll stay until then." She stood and walked to the cell and sat on the cot.

Isaac stepped back into his cell and pulled the door closed. He sat on the cot nervously. Luke nodded to Isaac. "You all right?"

Isaac nodded. "Yep. I ain't the one who got shot."

"Millie? You all right?" Luke lowered his voice.

"I'm fine, but I'm not leaving." She wasn't sure if she was okay or not. She was still numb.

Stromberg moved the chair and sat down, blowing out a heavy sigh. "Tell that doctor to hurry it up, I've not eaten since breakfast and I have work to get done tonight." He crossed his arms over his stomach and stared out the window.

Millie looked around and laid her hands in her lap. "Go get patched up proper, Luke. I'm fine. Really."

Not convinced completely, Luke knew he had to get his elbow patched up. There was a chunk of lead in it that needed to be taken out, or he'd get an infection. After a hesitation, he nodded. "We won't be long."

Luke followed the sheriff across the street to Doc Renfro's office. "You reckon Mercer told them the judge was here and that's why they all ran off like that?"

"For sure. Nobody wanted him to be able to identify them." Harvey knocked on the

door. "Hey, Doc! Paying customers here. Open up."

The doctor opened the door slightly, eyeing the two men, and then he opened the door wide. "Sheriff, you're wounded."

"Well, that does seem to be the consensus this evening." He chuckled a thumb over his shoulder. "So's he. The judge said to hurry. He's hungry and busy."

"Just don't botch the job because you're in a hurry," Luke said, only half-jokingly.

Doc adjusted his glasses and motioned for them to go into a room. "I thought the damage would be much worse, considering the hail of gunfire you all went through since last evening." He wiped sweat from his forehead and got out his tools.

They left the doctor's office less than an hour later. Back in the jail station, the judge was still staring out the window toward The

Saloon, and Isaac and Millie still sat perched on the edge of the cot silently.

“It’s about time. Where’s the best place to get a meal around here?” The judge stood. He towered over Harvey and Luke by several inches.

Luke cleared his throat and answered, even though the judge had barely spared him a glance since their meeting. “I would suggest Maisy’s. The food’s better and you have a choice between stew and beans.”

“The Saloon will serve you beans and potatoes if that’s more your thing.” Harvey moved to the cell and opened it, motioning for Isaac to come out.

“What are you doing?” The judge held out one large hand to the sheriff in a stop gesture.

“Well, it’s obviously not safe to leave him here, so I’m taking him somewhere else for the night. I assume the trial will be in the

morning?” Harvey motioned for Isaac again. He stood reluctantly inside the cell, eyeing the judge warily. Millie stood beside him.

“Nine in the morning. Townhall.” He pointed to Isaac, who seemed to shrivel a bit. “You better be there.”

Isaac nodded.

Millie glared. “It’s not like he’s going to run away. Would you if you were him and knew all those men were out to kill you?”

Stromberg eyed her and then chuckled, shaking his head. “See that he doesn’t, miss.”

Luke stepped toward the door and held it as the judge exited, then he turned to Isaac and the sheriff. “We could take them to my room at Maisy’s. It overlooks The Saloon and the view of the street is clear in both directions.”

“Good idea. We’ll sleep in shifts, just to be safe.” The sheriff waited for Isaac to trundle toward the door and then he followed. It was amazing to him that anybody would think Isaac was a cold-blooded killer.

Millie lagged behind a little, taking in the scene and replaying the incident. It would forever be lodged in her mind. She suspected it would be a long while before she could sleep without hearing those gunshots ringing in her ears. Luke walked with Millie in silence down the street to Maisy’s. She took comfort in being near him, but she didn’t feel like making conversation. Apparently, neither did he. His warm, tender smile as he looked at her was enough.

The next morning, Haven Ridge was abuzz with people all heading toward the town hall. Luke made a path through the crowd and held tightly to Millie’s hand as they entered. A makeshift courtroom had been set up and Judge Stromberg stood off to one side, eyeing the crowd flatly.



The sheriff had brought Isaac in with shackles on his wrists, as was protocol for anyone charged of murder. Millie hated seeing her father in chains. It was so demeaning. She started to go to her father and Luke stopped her.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry you can't sit with him. You can sit right here behind us, though." He guided her to a plain wooden chair five feet from where he would sit with the sheriff and Isaac. She didn't like it but complied after a moment.

Luke saw Deacon seated on the other side of the room, along with Carson Morgan and a few of his other men. Wade, Boomer, and Tad were absent, and he figured it was because of their wounds. Or because Deacon was mad at them for not succeeding in their mission to kill Isaac. Or, they were in hiding to avoid being implicated and arrested. Carson and Deacon thought they were untouchable—nobody would ever dare turn on them, Luke smiled wryly, knowing different.

Clyde sat close to the center aisle on the other side, too. He kept his eyes trained on the back of the chair in front of him. Deacon gave Luke and the sheriff a smug, self-satisfied smirk as the judge took his seat and the proceedings began.



# Chapter Twenty-

## Eight

Isaac took the stand and Luke watched as he trembled visibly while being sworn in. He took his seat and actually fared much better than Luke had thought he would. The man's resolve was like iron. His voice broke several times as he recounted the events from the night of the shooting. He made solid eye contact with Deacon and Carson several times. At the end of his testimony, Isaac cleared his throat and didn't leave the stand.

"Your Honor, could I say something before I go back to my seat?" Isaac's voice was much stronger.

Judge Stromberg scowled over his glasses at Isaac for a moment. "Keep it short and keep it relevant, Mr. Thomas."

Nodding, Isaac looked over the crowd. "I was drunk that night. I've been drunk a lot over the last year since my Wilma died, but I didn't shoot Samuel. He was my friend. His family and mine have been friendly with each other since we moved here. He was good people and I had no reason to shoot him." He looked back to the judge. "There's them here that could testify that I don't even carry a pistol; never have. I don't shoot 'em either; just my rifle. That's the God's honest, your Honor."

Judge Stromberg nodded without changing his expression. "Thank you, Mr. Thomas. Please step down."

Deacon gave Luke a silent laugh and shook his head. Carson crossed his arms over his chest and stretched out in his chair. Luke couldn't wait to see their expressions when Clyde took the stand next.

As Clyde walked to the stand and was sworn in, Deacon elbowed Carson, both men

smiling broadly as they nodded to Clyde. Clyde shifted his gaze to the center aisle as he sat down.

He was asked to recount the events of the night in question.

“Well, I just took an oath to tell nothing but the truth, didn’t I?” Clyde shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

Judge Stromberg looked over his glasses at Clyde. “Yes, sir. You sure did. It was a legal oath before man and God. You best remember that, Mr. McCormick.

Deacon and Carson found that funny and continued laughing silently. Luke looked over Isaac to the sheriff questioningly as Clyde’s silence drew out. Sheriff Roach nodded that it would be okay. Luke wasn’t so sure; and from the looks of Isaac trembling beside him, neither was he.

Looking directly toward Carson, Clyde

said clearly, "It was Carson Morgan there." He pointed to the man. "It was Carson Morgan who shot and killed Samuel Preston."

An audible gasp rippled through the crowd and then silence. Deacon's smile fell and his eyes grew huge as if he couldn't believe Clyde had the guts to tell the truth. Carson sat forward, pounded his knee with his fist.

"That's a lie, your Honor!" Carson stood, red-faced and glowering at Clyde. "A bald-faced lie!"

The judge pounded his gavel. "You'll take your seat, or I'll have the sheriff arrest you for contempt, sir. I will not tell you a second time."

Jacob Conley, sporting two black eyes, a swollen lower lip, and several lacerations on his face, hands, and neck had entered the trial room at some point and inched his way forward along the wall.

He wanted to testify, too.

Millie sobbed happily as she watched Jacob being sworn in. She leaned forward and put her hand lightly on Luke's shoulder. He squeezed her hand and nodded reassuringly over his shoulder at her.

Jacob said, "I wasn't going to testify here at all today. These injuries are from Deacon's men. They threatened me and my family to keep us quiet and I was going to do just that. But, if Clyde can come up here and trust in the law to make the right decision, I can, too." He didn't smile but gave Deacon a withering look.

With the eyes of the courtroom on him, Deacon had no choice but to behave for the time being. He whispered in Carson's ear several times and the big man nodded.

The judge dismissed Jacob after hearing his account of that night. It was truthful and Luke was glad to see that the two men had



been brave enough to stand up to the tyrant Deacon Owens.

The jury found Carson Morgan guilty of murdering Samuel Preston. There were delighted yells from most of the people present. Deacon tried to storm out of the town hall, but Luke intercepted him on the judge's command.

The judge said, "Deacon Owen, you are under arrest for the conspiracy to commit murder."

Luke struggled and got the shackles on him finally and nearly had to drag him to a room off the side and put him in a chair. "Sit still for your own good, Deacon. You're in enough trouble."

Harvey took a fuming mad Carson to a room off the side of the main room and ordered him to sit. His counsel was close behind: a thin, wiry, nervous man. "What punishment are we talking about here, Sheriff?"

Harvey grinned. "Death, of course. He'll hang for the murder."

Carson blanched. "You serious? You're going to hang me?"

The lawyer shushed him. "Please, Mr. Morgan, let me do the talking here for your own good."

"You call this for my own good, you quivering lump?" He held up the shackles on his wrists and shook them at the man. "How about you shut up and let me handle this?"

"Sheriff, you know I don't deserve to hang. You can't do this." The big man pleaded with his eyes.

Unaffected, Harvey shook his head. "I'm not doing anything to you, Carson. The judge decreed your sentence, not me."

“I thought it was just to...” Carson threw his hands over his face.

“To what? Scare you?” Harvey laughed. “No. Judge Stromberg usually means what he says.”

After letting Carson wallow in his feelings for a moment, Harvey said, “Maybe there is a way. Let me check on it.”

Carson immediately brightened and dropped his hands. “Yes! Yes, I knew there was another way.”

Harvey opened the door and motioned for the judge to join them.

Stromberg entered the room, looking sourly at Carson and his scrawny lawyer. “How may I be of assistance, Sheriff?”

“It seems to me that Carson is something we call small fish around here. He answers to

a boss, who's a *big fish*. Do you think we could get him a reduced sentence if he agreed to testify against his boss?" Harvey waited as the judge considered the plea deal.

"What are we talking here? Maybe life in prison for this one as a reduced sentence?" Stromberg crossed his arms.

Harvey nodded. "That would be fine with me. You know his boss is Deacon Owens."

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Stromberg finally nodded. "If Mr. Morgan and his lawyer agree."

"I agree. I don't care what he says." Carson flicked his hand dismissively at his counsel.

The judge agreed to draw up the new decree and put it into effect as soon as Morgan testified satisfactorily against Deacon.

Carson asked, "Can we go back out there and do it now?" He didn't trust that he was safe until a new trial could be scheduled. "I mean, if you leave out on your circuit, there's no telling when you'll be back and I'm afraid Deacon will send someone to kill me in the jail."

The judge gave him a stern expression. "Yeah, it seems you have a legitimate worry there, Mr. Morgan. The jail station has been riddled with bullets and scorched from a failed attempt to burn it down last night. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Carson looked down at the table. "I might, your Honor. If I did, I would surely tell the truth out there on the stand. Today. Right now, as it were."

The judge nodded. "All right. You'll have your chance." He paused at the door without turning, and said, "Don't squander your only opportunity to come clean, Mr. Morgan." Then he continued out, not waiting for a response.

Luke sat with Isaac when court convened for the second time that day. Isaac's shackles had been removed and Millie sat close behind him, one hand on his shoulder.

Millie was tearfully happy as Carson sang like a canary, listing one of Deacon's offenses after another, and telling the judge where all the evidence was to corroborate his claims. Deacon had to be removed from the courtroom because he kept yelling at Carson to shut up.

After Carson's testimony, the judge quieted the courtroom. "This was a highly unorthodox trial here today. I thank all of you for your patience, Mr. Thomas, especially."

The crowd yelled for Deacon's blood again. The townsfolk, upon learning the breadth and depth of his terrible deeds, wanted justice served quickly.

Stromberg banged his gavel and yelled to

quiet the crowd again. “Due to the obvious volatility of the townspeople of Haven Ridge, and the high-profile nature of this case, I’m transferring this case to Denver. There, the accused will be safely imprisoned in a proper jail until his trial. Sheriff Roach, will you please take Mr. Owens into custody and hold him in what’s left of your jail until I can arrange safe transport for him to Denver, at which time you will hand him over to the marshal?”

“Yes, your Honor.” Harvey led Deacon down the center aisle toward the doors.

The gathered crowd bayed in outrage at Deacon. Many of them took swings at the man as he passed and spat on him, cursing him. By the time they reached the doors and stumbled out into the street, Harvey felt as if he had just taken a rough tumble down a ravine wall, but it soothed him to know that Deacon probably felt worse.

Isaac sat smiling mutely at the happenings. The judge banged his gavel again

to quiet the crowd. “Mr. Thomas?”

“Y-yes? Yes, your Honor?” Isaac stood, directing his full attention to the judge.

“All charges against you have been dropped. You’re a free man.” Stromberg smiled, pulled off his glasses and motioned at Isaac. “Go on home now and enjoy being a free man in this great land.”

Luke stood and motioned for Isaac to go to Millie. She ran to the end of the row of chairs and he met her there. They hugged and she cried happily. She had been so afraid the day wouldn’t come that his name would be cleared before Deacon had him killed.

“Oh, Papa! I love you and I’ve missed you so much!” She hugged him again, tighter, feeling how thin he had gotten. It pained her.

Isaac laughed as his own tears fell. It was so good to be free, but it was even better to be free and *sober*. With a clear mind, he was able



to understand that his daughter was all that mattered. He cried and hugged her again. "I'm so sorry, Millie. Your mother would be ashamed of me for letting you down so much for so long." He pulled back from her. "Papa's back for good. Don't you worry no more, Millie. I swear that I'll do better. No more drinkin' for me. I'm gonna come back and fix up the homestead and make you proud."

"Oh, Papa, I was always proud of you. You're still the best man I know."

They went out the doors and into the street. Several people offered apologies to Isaac and Millie as they passed them. Luke thought a good dose of humility was good for the soul. The town was a far cry from being back to normal, but it was healing and that's what was important.

"Mr. Thomas, why don't you take Chester back to your place. You can bring him back to me tomorrow or the next day." Luke motioned to his horse.

Isaac pumped Luke's hand. "Thank you, *Luke*. I have a new lease on life thanks to you and the sheriff. If it hadn't been for you, Deacon's men woulda seen me dead in the jail."

"I'm glad you're safe and free, Mr. Thomas. That was my intentions from the beginning." He grinned wide, feeling good all the way to his soul. Everything except his arm. That still hurt fiercely.

Millie faced him, smiling and watery-eyed. "Thank you. You, Luke Houston, are an honorable man, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart." She hugged him, minding his injured right arm. "And, I want to apologize for not trusting you..." she looked away and cleared her throat. "And for those things I said. I'm real sorry about all that. But I'm not sorry for coming to the jail after I said I wouldn't. You understand." She grinned and tiptoed, giving him a kiss on the cheek; not just a peck, but a kiss that let her lips linger on the warmth of his stubbly cheek.

Smiling and raising his hand to his cheek, Luke recovered from his shock. "It's fine. Really. I'm sorry I didn't act too trustworthy some of the time. It's over now. Take your father home and fix him some of that wonderful stew you make." He laughed, shook hands with Isaac again, and headed for the jail.



# Epilogue

Luke had a decision to make about his future. He had sat on the fence long enough. It was high time he gave Sheriff Roach a definite answer. He still wasn't positive, but he was pretty sure, he wanted to stay in Haven Ridge.

Millie and her father rode up the street. Luke heard townsfolk hollering out more apologies and congratulations to them as they went. She blew a kiss off the tip of her fingers as she passed Luke and he caught it, laughing.

With that kiss still clutched in his fist, he stepped into the remains of the jail station. "Well, how about that outcome?" Sheriff Roach sat at the desk, which was now full of bullet holes.

Tipping his hat back, Luke looked at Deacon scowling from his cell and back to Harvey. He nodded. "I think it was right proper and fitting, even if it was late coming

to him.” He glanced back at Deacon.

“That it was.” Harvey kicked back in his seat, flinching from the pain in his side. “You know, if it hadn’t been for you, none of this would have come about this way. Why don’t you become my full-time deputy, Luke?”

Looking down at the floor and then to his clutched fist where Millie’s flying kiss remained, he chuckled and opened his hand. “That’s what I came to talk to you about, Sheriff. You wanted an answer before, and I couldn’t give you a definite yes or no.” He stood at the door, looking out at Haven Ridge. “I’ve wrestled with the decision since you first mentioned it.” He walked back to the desk, facing the sheriff.

“And what decision have you come to?” Harvey hoped the man would stay in Haven Ridge. If there was ever a good second-in-command for him, it was Luke. He also hoped that when the time came for a new sheriff to be named, Luke would still be around to take up the office. Haven Ridge would be a safe

place as long as he was around.

“Well, I think I might just stick around for a while, Sheriff. You know, there’s this girl...” He cocked his head at an angle and smiled.

“Yeah, but she can’t be the only reason you stay on as a deputy.” Harvey scoffed lightly.

“No, but, if I stay on as your deputy, that will give me a great excuse to be close to her while I figure out some things, won’t it?” He laughed, feeling more jovial than he could ever remember feeling before.

Harvey stood and shook Luke’s hand. “Darn right, it will.” Harvey hoped Millie and Luke could get the kinks in their relationship worked out soon. The young man, in Harvey’s opinion, needed Millie to settle him down, give him something stable and secure to call his own. The love of a good woman should be at the top of every man’s list. Or, that’s how he felt about it. He had watched their budding love nearly crumble over misunderstandings,

misspoken words, mistrust, but he was sure that with Luke's diligence and Millie's determination and kindness, they could conquer the past and have a bright future.

Not long after Deacon had been handed over for transport to Denver, the sheriff set about fixing up the jail station. The townspeople donated needed items such as lumber, glass, nails, and their time to help him. Luke helped, too. He had never built anything with his own two hands, and the hammer felt so foreign in his hand where he was used to having a gun that he nearly gave up after the first day. The sheriff had encouraged him, though. He didn't make fun of him, didn't think he was useless because he didn't know how to do much of the work needed, he just smiled warmly and tutored him quietly so the others wouldn't hear. After day three, Luke had become more comfortable with the work expected of him, and he didn't have to be told what to do every minute of the day. Within two weeks, they had the new jail fixed. It now had two more cells and an addition on the left side for an office.



Sheriff Roach smiled proudly at the building. His injury had almost completely healed, but it was still painful. He thought the hard work and a sense of justice being served had helped him heal quickly.

Luke stood by him in the street. “You know, it’s a shame what a man will do to get a new jail.” He tried not to grin but did anyway as the sheriff burst out laughing.

“I promise you that I could find a much better way than getting in a gunfight to get a new jail.” He rolled his eyes, flicked his hand at Luke, and went inside.

Following him, Luke looked around at the work he had helped with. He liked the fact that he had helped construct what was really a new jail station for the sheriff and the town. He stood in the office doorway, grinning sheepishly and turning his hat in his hands. “I guess I’m going to head over to the Thomas homestead. Isaac wanted me to come help him with the homestead as soon as we were finished with this.”

Harvey nodded. "How's that arm doing?"

Luke scoffed. "Not bad at all."

Harvey envied Luke his youthful ability to bounce back so quickly after such an injury. He nodded. "It's awful late to be starting a new job. We just got done a couple hours ago here."

Thinking only of being able to see Millie and maybe learning some skills that would help him impress her, he laughed lightly. "Then I should have been out of here a couple hours ago."

Harvey shook his head in amazement. "Well, then I guess I'll see you at sunrise tomorrow. Don't go out there and work so hard trying to impress that pretty girl that you can't make it in here in the morning." He tried to remember when he had been young and in love, full of endless energy and high spirits when it came to impressing his lady love. The

memories, he found, faded a bit with age. Like old photos, it starts around the edges, taking away and blurring out the unimportant parts first, and then after a while, all that's left is the center of the picture, the most important part—the love. That memory would never leave him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be here. See you then.” Luke rode Chester hard to the Thomas homestead. His insides were tied in knots. He had stayed on so he could be close to Millie and try to sort out all the deep, and sometimes-scary feelings she had brought out of him.

Those feelings made him assess himself and his hopes for the future in a way he never had before. Before Haven Ridge, he had thought his life was good, living free, in the wild, just him and his horse most of the time, he could decide when and how he wanted to do anything and everything.

Being in Haven Ridge and especially being near Millie, had changed the way he felt. His

life hadn't been grand at all. The grand life, he now believed, was having a loving wife, a place to call home, safety and security, and maybe even a couple of kids. The more he watched the lives of the townspeople of Haven Ridge, the more he thought that was exactly what he wanted. It seemed to be what most people strove toward in life.

The homestead reared into view and he slowed Chester, as always, to a walk. Echoing hammer-beats sounded from the other side of the barn. He rode down the path he and Millie had walked before, remembering how sweet she had looked as she picked that yellow flower. He waved a greeting to Isaac, who was hard at work on a fence post.

"Luke! Come on down here." Isaac motioned. He had begun to fear the young deputy wouldn't show up after all. He was indebted to him and the sheriff for all they had done to keep him safe and see that his name was cleared. But he had wanted Luke to join him working the homestead for another reason entirely. He knew his Millie had a love for the one-time bounty hunter. In his time

with Luke, he had decided that he was a good man, and as Millie had said, he was honorable. Isaac knew that was a fast-fading trait. If Luke and Millie were going to be together, he wanted to help them.

After all, the thought of having grandbabies running through the yards one day filled him with a sense of hope and wonder. He just wished Wilma had lived to share it with him.

Luke couldn't help but notice how much better Isaac looked. He had trimmed his hair and beard, his clothes fit better, and they were clean, and his skin was lightly tanned from his time out in the sun. His smile was broad, a bit crooked, and genuine. It warmed Luke to see it.

"Mr. Thomas, it's good to see you so chipper and spry. It seems that working out in the sun is agreeing with you." Luke dismounted and shook hands with Isaac.

"Nah, I think not being drunk and

miserable agrees with me, though. Did you come to help out with this fence today? Or, just visiting?" Isaac shoved his hands deep into his pockets and rocked back on his heels, still smiling.

"If you need my help today, that's why I'm here."

"Got finished with the new jail, huh?"

"Sure did." Luke rolled up his sleeves. "I have something to confess, Mr. Thomas."

Isaac stopped rocking on his heels, expecting Luke to confess to being sweet on Millie. "All right. I ain't no preacher, but I guess I can hear your confession."

Luke chuckled, embarrassed. He knew that if he didn't learn how to run a homestead, he would be no use to Millie ever. "Mr. Thomas, I've been on the trail my whole life. I was a bounty hunter for years and years." He looked around at the homestead, a sense of anxiety

settling on him. "I never learned anything else. I don't know anything about..." He waved his hands around to indicate the entire farm. "Any of this."

"Yeah, well, there ain't nothing here you can't learn from me. I dare say you'll pick up some useful things from my Millie, too." He winked and grinned at Luke.

Heat rushed into Luke's face. It was true. Millie could work circles around him on the homestead, but he didn't want her to be his teacher. If Isaac was willing to show him the ropes, that's how he would learn to homestead.

"Come on, now, young fella. I'll show you everything you need to know about the business of farming and homesteading in general." He walked Luke around to the front side of the barn. "Them are cows. We got ten of 'em." Turning to the pig pens, he said, "And them are pigs."

Luke laughed. "All right, all right. I got the

basics.” He pointed to the chickens. “Those are chickens. It’s the other stuff I don’t know.”

“Well, you feed your animals and your gardens, son. You feed them and then they’ll feed you. It’s a circle, you see. Nothing simpler in the whole world. Nothing more pure. Except maybe a newborn baby, or a good woman’s love.” Isaac sighed. “I had that for a good many years. My Wilma was the best woman in the world, and she loved me with a mighty powerful love.” He took a deep breath to keep his composure. “Every man needs a good woman, Luke.” He nodded and started toward the fence again.

Luke looked toward the house as the screen door banged. Millie bounced down the steps, her apron hem in her hands. Luke joined Isaac again quickly as she headed for the barn.

She called to the chickens and Luke realized she must have had corn for them. He tried to pay attention to Isaac’s instructions about mending the fence, but when he handed him the hammer, Luke didn’t know what he



expected.

Chuckling, he asked, “And you want me to do what?”

“Mm.” Isaac stepped to the fence and pointed to a board. “Nail that board to that post.”

After a couple of attempts, Luke had the board secured. He looked at Isaac. “Now what?”

“Well, you see that line of boards on the ground?” He pointed into the distance and Luke could see the boards on the ground between the posts.

The line stretched to where the land took a curve far out toward the end of the property. He nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Do them all just like you did this one. It’s perfect. By the time you reach the end, you’ll

be an expert fence-mender.”

“Papa! Are you working Luke so hard after his recent injuries?” She made a disappointed face at him.

Luke spun to face her. “It’s no problem. I’m here to help.” She was beautiful with the evening sun casting its deep golden color on her, lighting her hair into a fiery halo around her face. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he would wait, take things slowly, learn from her father, and make sure it’s what both of them wanted.

“Well, don’t you overdo it, mister. And, when you two are finished, come in for supper. It’ll be ready right around sunset.” Millie thought she could stand there and watch Luke work for the rest of the evening. He was so handsome it made her heart ache, but it was a good ache—not the kind she had when they had fallen out with each other before. She had made up her mind that she would never go through that again.

“You got it. Thank you.” Luke looked at Isaac. “If it’s all right with your father, of course. I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“I think she was inviting you more than me, anyway, Luke.” Isaac laughed.

Millie headed back home. She had told Papa all about Luke in the days since his return. He had listened carefully, picking up on nuances that she was still shocked over. But he had been right. She was sweet on Luke. Papa had said he would offer to let Luke work alongside him to get the homestead back up to its former glory, and then he would show him how to take care of it. That way, he could learn all he needed about homesteading.

Millie had wholeheartedly agreed, knowing it would afford her more time with Luke so they could really get to know one another and see where things led from there.

In the kitchen, she checked on the roasting chicken in the oven and the fresh vegetables on the stove. She had made biscuits fresh that

morning and had them in the warmer. She prepared the coffee to go on just before supper was set on the table, knowing Luke liked it as much as her father did.

She had even taken a liking to the bitter, hot drink herself.

That evening as the sun dipped low toward the mountains in the west and the shadows grew longer and deeper around him, Luke put up the last of the boards. Isaac had gone into the barn to work on another project, and he walked out to meet Luke halfway.

Walking down the fresh-built fence line, Luke felt a sense of pride at his handiwork. A man who never learned anything about domestic living had successfully built a fence.

Isaac saw him smiling and asked, “Did putting up those boards make you that happy? It never made me that happy, I tell you. Made me tired, though.”

Luke told him how it made him feel and Isaac nodded somberly. “Well, then, you’ll get to feel like that a whole lot in the next few weeks. We got plenty more fences to put up.” He laughed good-naturedly and clapped Luke on his good shoulder.

Isaac made Luke feel a part of the family and he was thankful for that. It had been many years since he had felt the comfort of something called home. After his initial bout of nerves when they went in to join Millie for another award-winning meal, Luke fell into an easy rapport with them.

Over the next several weeks, Luke spent every spare moment at the Thomas homestead. He worked until sunset almost every evening and spent the supper hour with Isaac and Millie, mostly in the kitchen, around the table. But sometimes, Isaac would excuse himself to go check on something in the barn, or in one of the outbuildings. Luke knew he was just giving him and Millie time to talk, and he loved the man for that.

As they sat in the living room one evening after supper, Millie couldn't help but let Luke know how proud she was of him and all he had done with his life.

"You've helped me and Papa more than any person ever has that wasn't family, Luke. And, you've made such a change in your life what with being named Deputy and all. I'm proud of you. You've achieved wonderful things with the life you've been given." She knew it wasn't completely proper, but she moved from her chair to the sofa where Luke sat.

He smiled as she sat arm's length away from him. "Thank you, Millie, that means a lot coming from you." Why did his heart thunder so loudly when she was near, and they were alone? He couldn't control it. He could savage through a gunfight in which he was outnumbered and still keep his pulse regular, but not with Millie, something about her conquered him completely.

"Good. I'm glad of that, Luke. That my

feelings mean so much to you, I mean.” She blushed, the heat seeming to rise from her neck. “I like spending time with you, too. You’ve had such an interesting life; I love the stories you tell. They’re so exciting.”

He chuckled nervously. He hadn’t realized she had paid much attention to his stories. That she liked them was a great boon to him. “I don’t know what gets into me sometimes, I usually don’t talk so much, but I enjoy telling you my stories.”

“Then why don’t you tell me one now?” She smiled and looked at him excitedly. “Please? A short one will do.”

The only story that came to mind was about his early childhood when his family had been whole before his life had been torn apart and he’d been tossed to the wind. He told her about his father and how he had taught him to fish. They had returned with their catches for his mother to brag on, and she had told him what a fine fisherman he was, and how proud she was of him.

Then it hit him; that's why that story came to mind. Millie had told him she was proud of him, just like his mother had done when he was little when things were good, happy. His words caught in his throat and his breath in his lungs.

Millie, loving the story, saw how it had affected Luke. She reached out to take his hand. He let her and even gripped hers in return. "Luke, listen, what happened to you and your family was the most horrible thing I can imagine, but there was nothing you could do. You were just a boy. Your parents know that and I'm sure they're watching you now, wishing you would understand it wasn't your fault." She moved closer. "Your parents would be so proud of you right now, I bet. I'd be proud of my son if he'd accomplished all that you have."

"Thank you for your kind words." He stiffened and reluctantly pulled his hand free. "Thank you, Millie. Your kindness has a healing effect on me. I've lived most of my life running from this guilt and I just don't know



how to be still, I guess.” He took a deep breath and moved to the edge of the sofa.

“I’d like to help you with that. We can talk whenever you feel like it. You don’t have to be afraid to talk to me about anything. I—” She sucked air in and held her breath, averting her eyes quickly. She had almost slipped and told him that she loved him. Thinking it might still be too soon to reveal that, she swallowed the words and cleared her throat. “I, uh, want you to feel free around me, okay?”

Luke nodded and his smile returned. Maybe with Millie, he wouldn’t have the urge to run away from his past. Perhaps there was a way to embrace it and move on with her. Even now, his urge to jump up and leave as soon as he got a little uncomfortable with his own feelings, had vanished.

They passed another hour talking about what still needed to be done to fix the homestead, and Millie threw in her hopes and dreams for her future. She couldn’t resist; she wanted to know how Luke felt about such

things as marriage, keeping a house, having a family, but she didn't know how to just outright ask him without sounding as if she were throwing him an invitation. So, she wheedled it into their conversation, even after her father had rejoined them.

Luke stayed much later than planned, but that seemed to happen often when he was sitting with Millie and her father.

The next day, as he rode toward the Thomas homestead, he had the overwhelming feeling of going home again. After a long day as deputy, he was dog-tired. The ride toward Millie rejuvenated him. He had an abundance of energy by the time he had joined Isaac in the barn.

"Which do you like better, Luke, beef or pork?" Isaac looked up from cleaning Blue Boy's shoes.

"Well, I don't know right off." He thought about it and decided silently that he liked beef better.

“Let’s say if you had to choose one to eat through the winter, which one?” He stood and took Blue Boy back to his stall, leaving Isaac to decide.

When he returned, Luke answered, “I’d have to say beef, sir. Why?”

“Because I’m ready to start expanding the homestead. I can take four of my pigs and trade them for two more cows. I got a pregnant sow, so I’ll keep her and have more pigs, too. What do you think? Good choice?”

Isaac had been letting Luke make a few decisions along the way about the homestead. So far, he had done well. Isaac thought he might be a natural homesteader. He had become more comfortable over the last several weeks with his duties and with him and Millie. One day, the homestead would be hers, and he wanted to know that Luke was as knowledgeable and smart about it as she was. He wanted to know they could be prosperous for future generations. He had never doubted

that Luke and Millie would end up married. Not for a second. Even though Luke had never proposed, Isaac knew full well that he would eventually.

“I think that would be a good choice, sir. You’ll be losing four full-grown pigs, but the sow will have more. You would gain two more cows, which will fatten the larder for winter. Yeah. Seems like a good deal.” He thought on it some more. “But you’ll have to make pens for more pigs if the sow has more than the four adults you trade, won’t you? And, that will mean having to feed more than you have now. Won’t that be more expense?”

Isaac clapped him on the back. “You got a real good head on your shoulders, Luke. Yes, that will be more expense, but we can sell off a couple of pigs later and make some money, that cuts down on feeding, too.”

They worked cutting down hay that day. Luke thought it was the most taxing chore he had done to date on the homestead. Sweat poured from him and the sun was relentless

out in the middle of the field without a shade tree or a breeze to cool him.

It had taken him the better part of an hour to master the mowing scythe, but once he did, he made short work of his acre. It wasn't easy work, but like the fence, it had filled him with a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Millie had worked hard all evening cleaning the kitchen, polishing their silverware, and making the kitchen sparkle. She wanted Luke to come into a clean, warm home after his hard day out in the field with Papa. She wanted everything to be perfect. It made her happy as she went about her chores. Made her happy to know that he was coming to her after working all day.

He had bought her a dress and hat for no reason other than he had just wanted her to have it. He had said he thought of her when he saw it. The material was white with little yellow flowers on it, and the hat had a wide yellow ribbon around it.

Of course, she had loved it. It was by far the newest and the fanciest dress she had, but what made it special was that he had picked it out especially for her. When she asked about the yellow flowers, he said he had remembered how she picked one when they had taken a walk months earlier before Papa was ever out of hiding. Her heart melted right then. That he had remembered such a tiny thing made her know he was the one.

She and Luke had become closer than close, and she was sure she was in love with him. It was the kind of love that would see her through the rest of her life. If she could spend it with him.

When Millie yelled for them to come to supper, he was more than ready to go in to one of her meals and especially to her glowing and beautiful company. She had helped tame the restlessness in his soul, something he had thought impossible.

She had helped him see that it was okay to dream and have hopes. *If you're going to dream,*

*dream big!* Had been her saying to him. Under her tutelage, he had learned to expand his horizons and his heart and take what comes every day as a blessing. Even if it's bad, it could be a blessing in disguise. Her world was so full of joy and hope that he was hard-pressed not to fall into it.

As he waited for Isaac at the end of the field, he thought he had tried for too long not to fall into her world of beauty and dreams. It was high time he took a running start and leaped into it like leaping into a pond after a hot day in the sun. Let her world wash over him, soothe him, make him whole.

Walking with Isaac toward the house, Luke smiled. "Nothing quite like it, is there?"

Isaac gave him a sidelong glance. "Like what? The work or the homestead?"

"Hmm. I guess both; they go hand in hand, don't they?" Luke tipped his hat off, letting the cooling evening temperature do its job on his overheated body.

They washed up outside instead of dragging their grime into the house for Millie to have to clean up later, which she had told them she appreciated greatly. She had told them it gave her more time to spend cooking delicious meals for them to gobble up after a hard day of work. They had eagerly washed out of doors ever since, both agreeing it was a fair trade indeed.

Isaac grinned at Luke. "I'll race ya to the table!" He bolted up the steps quicker than Luke had thought he could manage.

Laughing, Luke trailed him all the way to the door. As he stepped inside, he was greeted with the wonderful aroma of Millie's famous stew. That rich and savory smell that made him taste the food before he ever got to the kitchen.

Passing through the doorway and into the kitchen, he saw Millie pouring coffee into their cups. She smiled up at him sweetly, love in her eyes, face glowing. Everything was



perfect. She had used their best dishes, the kitchen was spotless, and she wore the dress he had bought her—the one with the yellow flowers she liked. The white against her tanned skin was like a flash shot of beauty that no one could ever achieve but her. She set the coffee aside and smiled at him again.

It was that smile that always melted his insides—the smile that would always be his undoing. *She could win wars by melting men's hearts with that smile*, he thought.

“Would you care for a bowl of my famous stew, Deputy Houston?” She made a flourish over his steaming bowl and pushed the bread plate toward him as he took his seat. She took notice of his changed, softer, more serious demeanor as he sat. It gave her chills.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for another bowl of your stew, Millie.” As he stared into her eyes, the world seemed to fade away.

It was just the two of them in that moment

and he wished that moment could stretch out for an eternity. As he continued to hold her gaze, he looked deeper into her soft, hazel eyes, and he could see that eternity. He could see his future family, his home, feel the warmth and joy. And then he knew she had proved him wrong on another thing. He could love again. He did love. He loved her.

*A man could sure get used to this,* he thought.

Isaac cleared his throat and mumbled something to excuse himself from the room. He went out the door and sat on the porch, smiling.

Millie leaned forward, closer to Luke; he leaned toward her, lost in his feelings.

She placed a hand against Luke's cheek, her heart thudding so hard she could feel it throughout her entire body. Without another hesitation, she closed her eyes and waited for his lips to touch hers. It was the most wonderful moment of her life. She was lost in

the feel of it, and what it meant. Luke did have the same feelings for her that she had for him.

His arms wrapped around her waist and he pulled her close, only breaking the kiss once she was firmly in his grasp. “Millie, I love you.”

His voice was low and raspy. Her heart swelled. “Oh, Luke! I love you, too.”

Smiling roguishly, he put his hand at the nape of her neck and drew her face toward his. “I thought I’d never hear you say that.” He kissed her deeply and passionately again.

When they parted, Luke thought, *I could definitely get used to that.*

***THE END?***

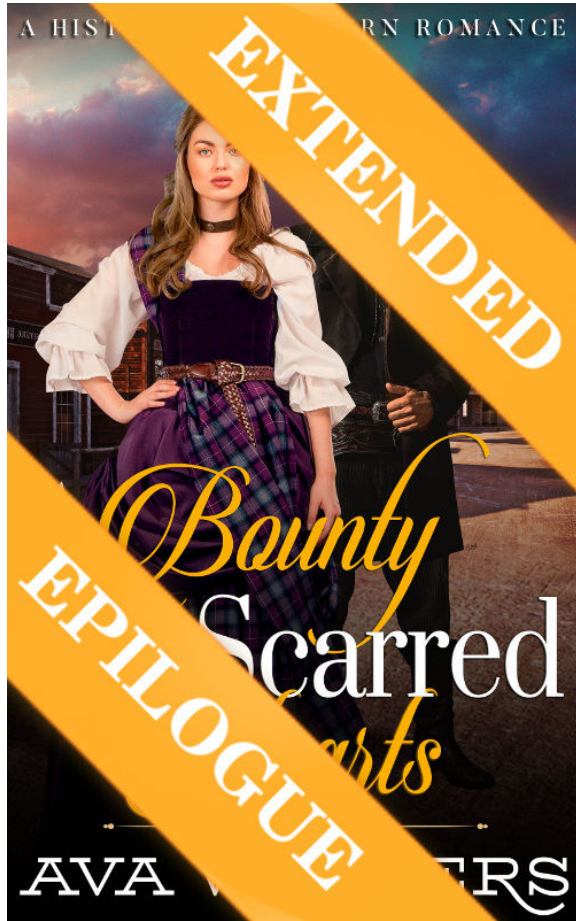
(turn the page)

# Extended Epilogue

---

**Can't get enough of Millie and Luke's  
story?**

Don't miss the complementary chapters  
featuring the beloved couple!



**CLICK/TAP here to get the Extended Epilogue (FREE)**

I guarantee you that you won't be disappointed

Then return, for an extra sweet treat from me...

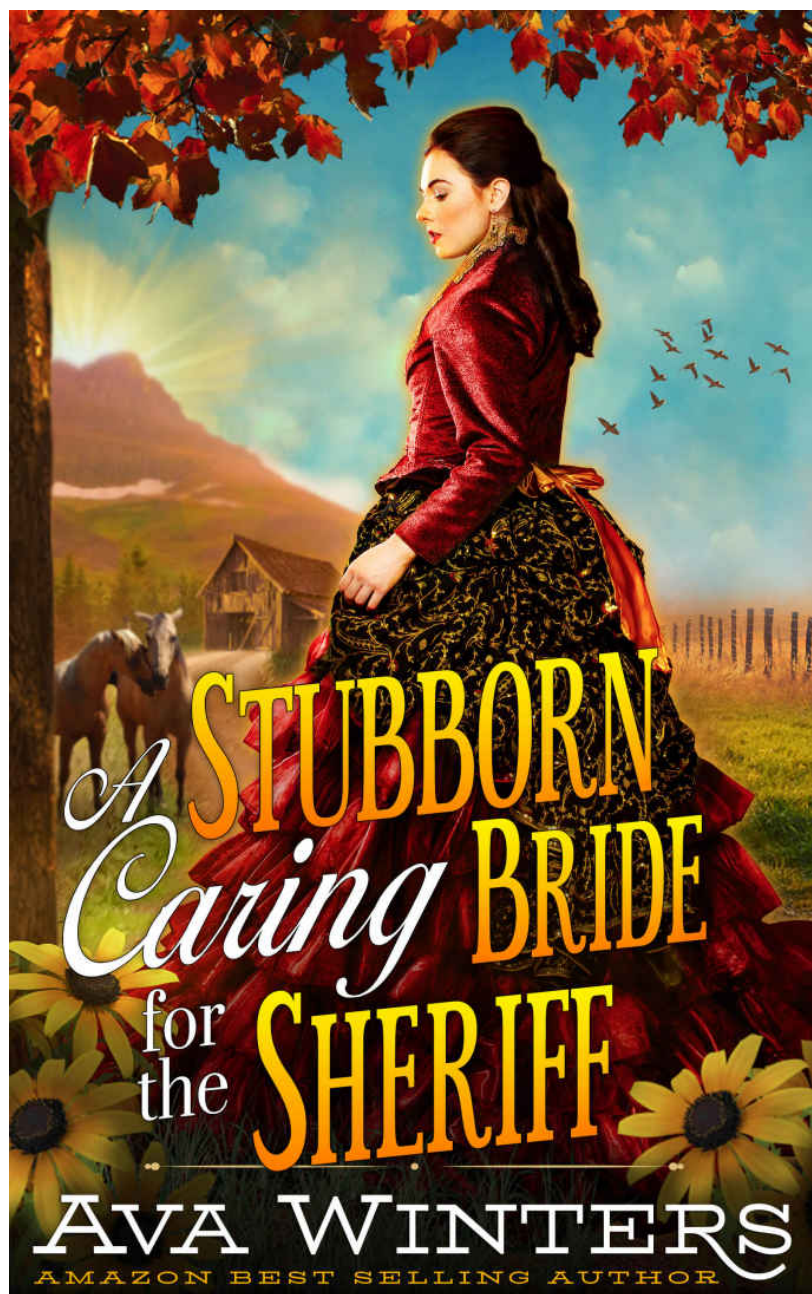
*(turn the page)*

# Ready for your next Romance story?

---

**Turn on the next page to read the 2<sup>nd</sup>  
Book of this Western Historical Romance  
Boxset “A Stubborn Caring Bride for the  
Sheriff”! Don’t miss my Amazon Best Selling  
Novel!**

*(turn the page)*



A **STUBBORN**  
*Caring* **BRIDE**  
for the **SHERIFF**

AVA WINTERS  
AMAZON BEST SELLING AUTHOR





# A Stubborn Caring Bride for the Sheriff



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

*A Western Historical Romance  
Book*

by

*Ava Winters*

# Blurb

---

When Roy saw Sannie, he had a new chance to gain her forgiveness and a caring family. But someone from her past knows how to attack their most vulnerable emotions to set them apart.

Sannie is a dazzling woman with a sharp mind. Having spent the last years as a con artist, without even choosing so, she decides she's had enough. But Ivan, her threatening current partner in crime, is her last barrier to fulfill her lifelong dream of a loving family.

Roy is a bold and blunt Sheriff. Having a tender heart that pounded for leaving behind the only woman he ever loved did him no good, so he decided to leave it in the past. Now he longs for a peaceful and emotion-less life ... but everything changes when Sannie and Ivan come into his town.

Now well-hidden secrets, strong buried emotions, and two hearts that ache to reunite are ready to be unfolded.

Despite the fact, they are on opposing sides, and Ivan will do anything to keep them

apart, Sannie and Roy will fight with all they have for a second chance in love.

How can Sannie and Roy overcome all obstacles find the forgiveness and the loving family they were looking for when the past threatens to repeat itself?



# Prologue

## *A Cheater at Heart*

### **1865, outskirts of Marshall, TX**

Sannie's heart raced with excitement as she faced the burly, rugged man that stood before her. He was angry and threatening and altogether more intimidating than any opponent she had faced in her young life.

Sannie, however, was confident.

“They say you never lose a bet, eh?” the man asked her, leaning forward. His breath smelled of cheap whiskey and chewing tobacco. “You and your little friend have run circles around my folks, I’ve heard.”

Sannie's eyes flickered to the boy that stood beside her. Roy had a straight face on as he watched the proceedings. He was the master of maintaining a poker face. Sometimes his dark brown hair would fall so low over his

crystal blue eyes that it would be impossible to ascertain his emotions. Roy glanced back at her and gave her the tiniest of smiles.

Sannie turned back to her new opponent with more resolve. The burly man's friend whispered something in his ear and the man shushed him, ordering another whiskey.

"I'll tell you what, kid," the man said with a crooked grin that revealed a missing tooth. "I'll let you bet all the gold you won from my friends over the last few nights. One bet for all the money you swindled off my folk."

"And why would she do that?" Roy asked the man uncomfortably.

"Because obviously you swindled my friends out o' that cash," the man explained, leaning forward with a raised finger. "I don't know how you fooled 'em, 'cause they've got to be the most skilled chisellers themselves and they ought to have caught you. But *I* won't let that happen."

“I still don't see why we have to make any bets with you,” Roy said, crossing his arms.

Sannie appreciated how brave he was acting before the admittedly scary-looking fellow.

“‘Cause if you don't play, I'll have these guys knock the stuffing out of you,” the man threatened pleasantly.

Sannie gulped nervously.

“You'd threaten a lady?” Roy asked darkly.

“She's playing cards in a tavern, at what, fifteen?” The man cackled. “She ain't no lady.”

“How dare you—” Roy began.

Sannie raised her palm and placed it



against Roy's shoulder. He paused to glance at her briefly, but a moment was all it took with Sannie and Roy. They had a friendship that went back years, and a connection that was unrivaled. They could know each other's minds by just meeting each other's gaze.

*Easy, Sannie thought as she peered back at him with supreme confidence. Let him play me. He can only lose.*

Roy took in a shallow breath and backed away. It was a smart decision, too; they were mere teenagers in a shady tavern filled with much burlier and bigger men. These were men that were on the road, too, and not the polished folk from the city. They had to play their cards right.

Literally.

“So, are you in, my lady?” the man asked mockingly, inducing a sneer from his friends. They were all eager to watch Sannie and Roy lose a bet. Over the last few days, they had beaten them at poker, one by one,

repeatedly. They'd made away with most of their pocket gold, which stirred up quite a lot of trouble. One of the disgruntled goons had gone to fetch their leader, who now sat before Sannie with a belligerent smirk.

"If I am to bet with you, would you tell me your name?" Sannie asked sweetly.

The burly man chuckled at her act of naivete and Sannie resisted the urge to grin. *He's going to fall for it hook, line, and sinker.*

"The name's Rover," he grunted, wiping a spot of whiskey off his crusty black beard. "And this is my clan you've been bettin' with."

"It's good to play with you, Rover." Sannie gave him her sweetest smile. With her impossibly large brown eyes; full, pink lips; and dimpled cheeks, she was the picture of an innocent, simple girl. On the road with Roy, she'd learned that if she could play the character, people would never suspect her of any wrongdoing. The stronger their ego, the harder they tried to ignore the fact that they

were getting played by a *little girl*.

Rover's grizzly black brows pulled together as he leaned closer to her. "Hold on there, little girl. We're gonna bet, but it ain't gonna be on cards."

"No?" Sannie pretended to look worried.

"No, we're not." The man grinned wickedly. "We can choose another game, anything without cards. You kids have probably been doin' slight-o'-hand tricks since ya'll were babies. I ain't playin' with that."

Sannie shrugged innocently. "You can choose the game if you'd like. I don't mind."

Rover and his cronies laughed uproariously at her proclamation. "Well, well, we're sorta cocky, aren't we? All right, then. I've got a game for you."

Sannie crossed her arms and leaned

forward, her ears perked up to absorb every word.

“I’m gonna put this glass right here,” Rover said, lifting a small, empty glass from a nearby tray and putting it in the center of the wooden table. “I’m going to fill it with rum, all the way to the brim. Just enough so it's totally full, but doesn't flow over.”

“Okay...” Sannie trailed off.

“One by one, we gotta drop coins into the cup,” Rover continued. “First one to make the rum spill, loses.”

Sannie eyed the glass before her, her mind churning. *I know this game. The first person has to drop enough coins in so that the next person cannot drop in another coin, but not so many that the rum spills over.* Her fist clenched under the table. *But I’ve only played this game with water! I know that six coins in the first turn for water would do the trick, but what about rum? If he plays his turn successfully, I will lose in my second turn!*

“What do you say?” Rover asked her with a sneer. “Are you game?”

Sannie stayed quiet, her eyes trained on the glass. *I cannot let him win. Our winnings from this tavern are our whole loot for the month. Okay... Okay... How can I win?*

She gazed around herself, eyeing the room carefully. They were seated before a massive window, through which the afternoon sun’s warm rays filtered into the dingy bar. Sannie’s eyes flitted between the window and the small lump of chocolate that lay in her pouch.

*I’ve got it! Yes!*

“All right, I’m game,” she said coolly. “But we have to choose another table. How do I know you haven’t tilted this one or something?”

“Fine, choose whatever table ya like,” Rover said, leaning back in his chair. Sannie

pretended to eye the tavern thoughtfully, rubbing her chin. She paused when her eyes landed on the seat right in front of the window, where most of the sun's warm rays were falling.

“How about that one?” she asked, pointing at the table.

Rover shrugged with an air of supreme confidence. “It's all right with me.”

Sannie stood up immediately and began to walk over to the table so she could get the seat she wanted. She went and sat down on the chair with its back to the window. This way, her back was to the sun. She watched the outline of her shadow on the table with the smallest of smiles.

*This is perfect.*

“All right then,” Rover grunted as he hustled his overgrown body into the chair across from her.

Roy had come by her side once more. The sound of his even breathing really calmed Sannie down.

“Are you ready?” Rover asked as one of his cronies brought over a small glass.

“I’d like to take a look at this glass,” Sannie requested, widening her eyes. “Just to make sure I’m not getting chiseled. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Rover said, leaning closer. “But I’m watchin’ you. No funny business.”

“None,” Sannie promised, pulling the glass toward her with a wide-eyed look. She ran her fingers along the edge of the glass and then peered into the inside to make sure it was completely empty. Then, so quickly that no one could see, she ran her thumb along the bottom edge of the glass. A piece of chocolate that she’d stuck to her thumb was now attached to the bottom of the glass. It was too small a piece to catch casually with one’s eye,

but it was big enough for what she wanted to pull off. She quickly put the glass back on the table, making sure to keep it in the shade.

“All right,” she said to Rover, raising her eyes to his black gaze. “Let’s play.”

The goons around him cheered uproariously, thoroughly entertained by the game before them. They seemed to be utterly certain that their leader would win, judging by their snide grins and whispered comments. One of his goons reached forward to fill the small glass with rum.

*He’s probably played this game here many times, Sannie reflected, watching Rover’s haggard face carefully. Well, he’s about to be surprised.*

“Since you’re such a *lady*, I’ll let ya go first,” Rover said, confirming her suspicion.

*Of course, he asked me to go first. He knows I won’t have the guts to put enough coins in to beat him. He’s definitely played this before.*



“All right,” she agreed with a smile. “Roy, can I get some of the silver coins—”

“Use the gold,” Rover commanded, his lip curling.

“I’d rather use the silver,” Sannie said.

“Well, we’re using the gold,” Rover replied with a hideous, toothy grin. “You’re not a chicken, little girl, are ya?”

Sannie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “The gold it is,” she said, accepting a handful of coins from Roy. He gave her a significant look before she turned away from him.

“Start,” Rover commanded, his gold coins kept before him at the ready.

Sannie took a deep breath and picked up five coins, eliciting a few gasps from the onlookers. One by one, with as much care and attention as she could manage, she dropped

the five coins into the depths of the rum. The liquid rose dangerously close to the brim ... and then came to a halt.

Everyone let out a collective breath, including Sannie.

“Well done, little girl,” Rover said mockingly. “You’re not totally daft then, are ya?”

Sannie did not respond. She waited quietly for him to play his turn. *He has to play it before the chocolate melts.*

Rover reached forward with only one coin in his hands. He gave Sannie one cocky, wicked grin before dropping the gold into the glass. The liquid danced around the edges, almost spilling over. Almost.

Rover’s grin was already victorious. “Your turn, little girl.”

Sannie stared up at him sagely. *He must*

*know I can't put another coin in without spilling the rum. I have to act nervous.*

She began to bite her lip and twiddle her thumbs together as she eyed the glass. Rover watched her display of under confidence with a predatory smirk.

“We don't have all day, missy. If ya lose, ya lose,” he commented, drawing a few sniggers from the crowd.

Sannie leaned away from the table with a grimace. “I think, maybe, that my shadow is stopping me from seeing the rum clearly.”

Rover laughed loudly. “Eh, look at these excuses! I've never heard the like. I'll tell ya what: Why don't you come to my end and put the coin in from here? You're still gonna lose.”

“Yes, I'd like that,” Sannie said, quickly shuffling over to his side of the table. He leaned away to give her room, leaning into one of his cronies' ears to whisper a secret

joke.

Sannie ignored him. Her eye was on the glass that was now sitting in the hot rays of the summer sun. She watched the glass like a hawk, pretending to think as she waited for the beams of the sun to melt the chocolate. When Rover began to get impatient next to her, she raised a coin in her hand, approaching the glass.

She resisted the urge to grin. The chocolate had melted and the glass was level again. She could see that the rum would safely take one more coin, now that the glass wasn't tilted any longer. Hovering above the glass with the fake hesitance of nervousness, she slowly and carefully dropped one more gold coin into the glass.

The coin fell to the depths of the glass and the rum rose to the edge of the brim, the surface of the liquid dancing just over the wall of the glass without spilling.

*YES!* Sannie wanted to cry out with joy

but she resisted the urge once more, resigning herself to a relieved sigh.

“NO!” Rover howled as he stared at the table in pure disbelief. “This... This can’t be!”

“It’s your turn,” Sannie said coldly, going back to sit down in her seat.

Rover turned to the glass with definite fear in his eyes. He raised one coin in his hands, swallowing audibly. His hand was shaking, Sannie could see it. He swallowed loudly once more and leaned forward.

*He can’t win. He has to know that by now.*

Rover was sweating profusely as his coin hovered over the surface of the rum. He was panting and trying to hold his breath at the same time. The man was a wreck.

*Even if there was more room for a coin in the glass, he’s such a mess he couldn’t sink it!*

Sannie realized, crossing her arms against her chest.

Rover gnashed his teeth together audibly as his coin hovered just a breath away from the surface. Everyone in the tavern was silent.

The edge of the coin touched the surface of the rum and it immediately spilled over the sides, wetting the wood of the table underneath.

“NO!” Rover roared as his defeat became certain. The entire tavern exploded in a cacophony of laments and even a handful of cheers. Rover sunk his head in between his hands and breathed heavily, his shoulders falling up and down. Sannie walked back to their original table and picked up the bag of money she’d bet against Rover. Roy quickly picked up the coins on the game table and hurried over to Sannie’s side.

“That was amazing!” he cheered as he neared her.

“Yeah, yeah, we gotta get out of here,” Sannie said, pulling her bag over her shoulder.

“What about the coins in the glass?” Roy asked, casting a glance behind him.

“Leave them!” Sannie hissed to him. There was so much discussion and commotion in the tavern that there was no way she could be heard. “I cheated!” she told Roy. “If they find out, we’re dead!”

Roy had heard enough. He grabbed Sannie’s hand and they raced out of the dingy tavern and into the sunny afternoon outside. Thorny shrubs and vast, unending plains greeted them as they hurried away from the dangerously shady tavern.

“We have to start playing at nicer places,” Sannie huffed as she jogged.

“Tell me about it!” Roy yelled. “How did you even cheat there?”

“I stuck a piece of chocolate under the glass so that it was tilted and it looked full when it wasn’t really,” she explained, slowing down a bit so she could hear him. “Then I moved so that the sun would melt the chocolate and I could put in the last coin!”

Roy came to a complete halt, his jaw hanging loose.

“What?” Sannie asked him with a slow smile.

Roy reached forward and gave her sweetest, softest of kisses on her lips. Sannie’s cheeks reddened furiously in response.

“You’re incredible,” he told her.

Behind them, a loud howl emanated from the tavern they’d left behind.

“Uh oh,” Sannie let out a whistle. “We gotta scram.”



“Come on,” Roy said, holding onto her hand as tightly as he could, his crystal blue eyes twinkling at her.

They ran toward their unknown futures together.



# Chapter One

*A Robber at Heart*

***Sannie***

**1870, Near St. Louis, TX**

The feeling of the rolling wheels of the stagecoach underneath Sannie's feet had become soothing now. Familiar.

The grunt of the shoddy metal brought her comfort even today, the tensest day she'd had to face for a few weeks now. She raised her large, chocolate brown eyes and gazed at the fellow passengers that rattled along with her toward St. Louis in a rickety, two-door stagecoach.

Mildred, a lady who claimed to be a real fortune teller who was going to St. Louis to sell her talents, was asleep under a heavy-looking grey cloak. William, a quiet and reserved salesman, sat across from Mildred. He, too, was asleep.

The fourth passenger was a kindly old woman named Alice. Alice had been Sannie's favorite person in this stagecoach. She was funny, clever, and kind-hearted. It pained Sannie deeply to know what was to come today.

“Are you all right, Delores?” Alice asked Sannie with a small smile on her weathered face. The sound of her fake name intensified Sannie’s guilt. “You look tense.”

“I just miss my home,” Sannie replied with a casual smile. “I’m eager to be back.”

“Aren’t we all?” she chuckled, pulling a strand of her greying hair behind her ear. “I’m dyin’ to see my grandson. He’s nearly eight now. And he’s becoming quite a looker.”

“You must be very proud,” Sannie said in a low voice.

“Yes, between him and my daughter back home I’ve got a pretty full life.” Alice

nodded sagely. “Would have been fuller if my husband hadn’t run off to war, but I suppose you can’t have everything.”

*You’ve had more than I ever will,* Sannie thought to herself, feeling very aware of the gun nestled in her lap underneath her heavy shawl.

“Moonpie, you look... disturbed,” Alice pressed on.

*Moonpie.* Alice’s preferred nickname for Sannie made her heart ache. She huddled inside her coat, feeling colder from within. “These long journeys just get to my health,” she replied dully.

“Why don’t I tell you a story, just to take your mind off o’ this rattling,” Alice offered. “It always worked on my son. He would set one foot in a stagecoach and be hurling on all fours two minutes later, unless I took his mind off it.”

Sannie chuckled with amusement,

grateful for Alice's efforts. "Sure, I could do with a story."

Alice smiled at her widely, kindness brimming over in her eyes. "Alrighty! Let me think..." She hummed, scratching her silver head. "Yes, I've got it. Have you heard of the tale of Victoria's diamonds?"

"Who?" Sannie questioned.

"It's a famous fable from my daughter's town, Little Rosa," Alice began seriously. "Many, many years ago, a bandit that ran the prairies was given a gift of a hundred priceless diamonds in exchange for one favor. He had to find the land with the most fertile soil, where the tallest grass and the strongest cattle could grow. And he had to rid the land of all its inhabitants."

"Oi," Sannie whispered.

"Yes. What followed was a bloodbath, and a ruthless and effective one at that," Alice continued, leaning away from Sannie.

“Afterward, the bandit was said to have married the girl with the largest ranch in Victoria, promising the diamonds to their children in his will. It is said that the diamonds are still in Victoria today, hidden inside the house of some wealthy widow.”

“Whoa.” Sannie let out a low whistle. “That’s quite a tale.”

“It’s not just a tale, Delores.” Alice shook her head with a small smile. “Many think that the diamonds became so infamous because they *are* real. In fact, many people have even reported spotting them from time to time, whenever they’ve been in the hands of an owner that liked to show them off.”

Sannie leaned in, placing her elbows on her knees. The story was catching her interest. “Where were the diamonds seen last?” she asked seriously.

“The last I heard, they were in Little Rosa, right here in Texas,” Alice chuckled. “My daughter lives there! Can you believe it?”

A hundred priceless diamonds just lyin' there in her village."

"That'd be quite the fortune, eh?" Sannie asked, her mind wandering.

"You could settle in a nice place by the coast on those diamonds alone," Alice said with a giggle. "My grandson likes to talk about finding them someday—"

"HALT!" a loud voice suddenly called from outside.

Sannie felt her breath hitch.

"HALT NOW!" the voice outside ordered more brashly.

Alice turned to give Sannie a frightened look as their stagecoach hobbled to a grinding halt. The other passengers began to stir, peeking over their woolen coats with alarm.

"Surely, we're not there yet," Alice said



meekly, peering out of the small glass window.

Sannie took in a deep breath. *It's time.*

“Ay!” they heard the driver cry as the sounds of a scuffle erupted from outside.

Alice backed away from the window and gave Sannie a frightened glance. “Are we being robbed?” she whispered, the wrinkles on her aged face deepening. “Moonpie?”

Sannie didn't respond. She clasped her hands around the gun hidden inside the folds of her shawl and quietly waited.

“Drop your treasures!” a voice called from outside in a clear, loud tone.

“Dear Lord in Heaven,” Alice mumbled, her eyes closing shut.

Sannie grit her teeth and turned up her chin.

The sounds of a few trunks and bags hitting the sandy ground reached them. Everyone in the coach was awake now. Sannie could see their frightened faces and the crosses clutched between their paling knuckles.

*We're frightening them*, Sannie reflected as she always did. *We make a living out of frightening them.*

The door of the stagecoach swung open suddenly then, and Ivan stood outside with his cold grey eyes glowing underneath his black, flat-brimmed hat. Shinier than his gaze was the steel of his revolver, cocked directly at the passengers within.

“Out with yer goods,” Ivan commanded in a thickened accent.

Alice was the closest to the other door in the stagecoach and reached for it instinctively. Sannie pulled her gun out of the depths of her shawl and pointed the gun at the old lady, stomping on the regret that swelled

in her gut.

“Sorry,” Sannie breathed. “You must give up your jewels, ma’am.”

Alice’s dark eyes widened as betrayal overcame her kindly features. “Delores?” she whispered softly.

“Throw out your treasures, NOW!” Ivan shouted, startling them.

Alice’s eyes flickered between her two assailants as she hurriedly untied a small coin purse from her belt and threw it into the pile. The other passengers followed suit, throwing their petty cash and trinkets into a pile on the floor of the stagecoach. Sannie kicked each item toward Ivan, who proceeded to shove them into his bag, one by one.

“All the jewelry, out,” Ivan instructed them, waving his gun as he spoke.

Sannie flinched. *I wish he would stop just*

*waving that thing around without care!*

“I want every item of jewelry on the ground or you’re gonna get my boot!”

The passengers began to pull off their chains and rings, throwing them in the pile on the ground with great reluctance. Alice took off the ruby-encrusted, berry-shaped brooch that was clipped onto her buckskin coat, but she didn’t chuck it to the ground. Her fingers stayed on it as unreadable thoughts ran through her sorrowful eyes.

“Drop the brooch, lady,” Ivan spat.

“Please,” Alice implored, folding her hands around the shiny brooch. “My husband left this for me before he left for the war. I ... I never saw him again.” She sniffed. “This is all I have to remember him by. Please, may I just keep this?”

“I don’t give a continental about yer life story,” Ivan spat, raising his gun to level with Alice’s face.

Sannie gulped nervously.

“Please, Delores,” Alice breathed to Sannie softly.

“Drop the brooch, ma’am,” Sannie replied, keeping her face expressionless. A moment of weakness and her face would betray her guilt. She knew it.

Alice’s face crumpled with weary sadness and she let the brooch fall to the ground. She turned away so she wouldn’t have to watch it fall.

Sannie quickly got to her feet and stepped over their plunder toward the door of the stagecoach. She hobbled out and turned to put the remaining loot into her pouch. She put one gold timepiece, one gold chain, one silver bracelet, and three gaudy rings into her pouch. Then her fingers reached for the final item on the floor and she paused.

The berry-shaped brooch was easily the

most expensive item in their haul. Its ruby-encrusted shell would allow them to retire from the looting life for at least a few weeks. It made sense to take it, now that they'd already terrified and harassed the passengers.

But her fingers wouldn't obey her mind's command. They hovered near the glimmering brooch, but something held her back. Her eyes flickered to her right; Ivan was loading the bags onto his horse and stood a ways away from her. Then she turned back to the stagecoach, her eyes scanning Alice's huddled form.

Their eyes met and Sannie knew what she had to do.

Picking the brooch up with her left hand, she leaned away to pull the stagecoach door shut with her right arm. Alice's eyes widened with hurt as she saw Sannie lift the item. Just as the door closed shut, however, Sannie flicked the brooch so it would slide back into the coach through the remaining space. As the gate slammed shut, Sannie saw Alice's shock through the window. The old

widow reached down to the ground and picked up the brooch, looking up to give Sannie a deeply grateful smile.

“AHHH!” someone screamed from behind her. Sannie whipped around instantly, her hand reaching for her gun. Before her, Ivan and the driver of the stagecoach were tumbling and wrestling on the ground, throwing up dust all around them. Ivan’s gun lay to the side. It seemed the driver had surprised him with his tackle.

Sannie rushed to her jet black horse, who was waiting patiently beside Ivan’s beige-colored mount. She strapped her newly acquired items to the saddle and turned back to the two men fighting on the ground.

The driver had pulled away from Ivan and was crawling on the ground, reaching for the gun. Sannie felt the blood drain from her face as a memory flashed before her eyes, as clear as though it were happening right at that instant.

*The round, black metal of the mouth of the gun shook ever so slightly as he pulled the trigger. Sannie would never forget the sound of the shot, the whiz of the speeding bullet. She knew the bullet was coming for her. She was directly in its way. She had less than a second—perhaps less than a millionth of that—to crash to the ground, away from the path of the speeding bullet.*

*She realized she was a second too late as her face neared the sandy, rocky floor of the desert. She felt the bullet pierce her leg, flying through muscle and sinew like a heated knife through butter, and screamed as pain, the likes of which she'd never experienced before, seared through her body, aching, bleeding, and burning*  
—

“Ivan!” Sannie cried as the driver’s fingers neared the handle of the gun.

Ivan was on the ground, holding onto the man by his belt, trying to pull him back. With one mighty grunt, he yanked the man backward and rolled forward on the ground beside him. As his body rolled ahead, he reached out and grabbed the gun, coming to a



halt right before the driver.

Ivan's face was contorted with ruthless anger as he raised his gun before the driver. The driver lunged out of Ivan's sight and tried to roll away behind the stagecoach. He was too slow, however, and Ivan shot the bullet right through his shinbone, shattering it with an audible crack.

Sannie screamed. *No, no, no, no!*

"Come on!" Ivan cried as he raced over to their horses. Sannie's eyes were glued to the driver, who hid behind the stagecoach, hyperventilating as he clutched his leg to his torso. His chest heaved up and down as his eyes darted around with fear.

"Sandra, *now!*" Ivan called as he mounted his horse.

Sannie gulped as she watched the driver curl on the ground in pain for two more seconds. Then, hardening her heart, she turned to place her foot in the stirrup and pull

herself up onto her horse.

“Come on, Lady,” she breathed to her mare, stroking her neck sorrowfully. The horse whinnied in response and began to gallop after Ivan’s horse, Jackal, who had already begun to race away from the stagecoach. The dusty evening wind of the desert whipped through Sannie’s long brown locks as she chased after her partner in crime. She resisted the urge to turn back and glance at the carnage she was leaving behind.

*I’m sorry*, she thought to herself, as she did after every one of these robberies.

It pained Sannie deeply to be the cause of so much grief and hurt, but she had to do whatever she could to put food in her stomach. They were having a tough go of it lately, and nourishment had become harder to come by than ever. Still, she winced as she watched Ivan ride away from their crime without so much as a frown. *I cannot believe he shot someone*, she thought darkly, anxiety twisting in her stomach like so many coiled snakes.

The life of a traveling bandit was fraught with danger and violence, but Sannie had gone out of her way to avoid hurting people at any cost possible. She had never shot another person—not once. She preferred to use the skills she'd learned early and best: the art of trickery, of cheating and hoodwinking. This was the reason she ran such elaborate scams with stagecoach robberies; she never wanted to rob an armed stagecoach and be forced into a violent duel that might cause someone's death. She preferred to infiltrate the passengers and ensure that they were the sort that would bow out sooner rather than later.

Their refuge hill began to reveal its stony peak in the far distance. Sannie bore down on her horse and bent her back, shielding her eyes against the cold wind. She longed for the rains to grace the land again so the prairie would come alive with grass. Freshly grown grass was one of her absolute favorite things in the world. It made her heart soar to stand before a vast, rolling grassland.

The deserted landscape around her resembled her desolate and aching heart far too much. The empty, brown hills made her feel as alone as one could bear. Sannie shut her eyes as a single tear rose to the surface, threatening to break away under the force of the relentless wind.

Ivan stuck out his arm as he bore right, disappearing behind the stony hill. Sannie followed suit, nudging Lady into the small opening hidden on the underside of the hill, behind Jackal. Dusk had fully settled upon the land now, and the stars had begun to twinkle in the night sky, blanketing the earth with their soothing glow. Sannie admired them as long as she could before disappearing into the darkness of the cave.

Ivan had already begun to dismount Jackal, tying the horse to a pole beside the cave's rocky wall. He walked over to the makeshift oil lamp they'd created and left on the floor of their hideout. He pulled a box of matches from his boot and lit the lamp, filling the cave's insides with its warm, yellow glow.

“How could you?” Sannie demanded loudly as she dismounted Lady, holding onto her skirt with her fist. “How could you shoot that man?”

Ivan rolled his eyes. “Sannie—”

“I *told* you I didn’t want to hurt people, did I not?” she questioned, moving toward him angrily. *How can he be rollin’ his eyes about this?*

“I didn’t hurt him bad. It was only his leg,” Ivan said with a shrug.

“Bein’ shot hurts, Ivan,” Sannie snapped, crossing her arms against her chest. “Or would you like me to demonstrate?”

“Are you threatening me?” Ivan asked her with a mocking grin.

“You shouldn’t have shot him,” Sannie replied firmly. “He was of no danger to you once you had the gun. You hurt him for no

reason!”

“I slowed him down so he can’t race and find a Ranger to do us in,” Ivan said, cocking a single blonde brow. “Now we’ll be days away from here before anyone gets wind of the robbery.”

“We’ve run away plenty of times without hurting anyone,” Sannie insisted.

“I did what I did in the moment, and that’s that!” he shouted angrily, raising a flat palm. “I got us here alive, didn’t I?”

“What if that driver dies?” she asked. “What if his wound gets infected? Don’t you care one bit?”

Ivan shrugged noncommittally. “People die every day. My only job is to not be the one doin’ the dyin’. That driver had the option to just let us go with our haul, but he thought it might be a good idea to tackle me and tousle with a man’s hat.” He adjusted the brim of his topper carefully. “He ought to know better

than that by now.”

Sannie gritted her teeth together as she held back her retort. “I hate hurting people,” she said simply.

“This is the life of an outlaw, Sannie,” Ivan said plainly, untying the bags from Jackal’s saddle. The horse whinnied breathily in response to his master’s touch, nuzzling his neck against his face as he fiddled with the saddle.

“I’m starting to get real tired of it,” Sannie replied.

“Let’s check out the haul, see what we got,” Ivan said, pulling off the crudely made saddle. Their belongings had worn out immensely over the last few months. As stagecoach robberies became more and more common along the country roads, passengers stopped carrying bonds along with them. The stagecoaches that took the rich townsfolk across the country promised hefty jewels and gold mounds, but these days, those coaches

were always equipped with an armed and trained driver.

That was a risk Sannie was unwilling to take.

*I got a lot of life left to live*, she reminded herself once more, steeling her resolve. Her determination to stay away from the richer, more dangerous stagecoaches created a lot of trouble in her partnership with Ivan. They were close friends and comrades once, both bound by their mutual desire to one day steer toward making an honest living. Time, however, had worn Ivan down in a way that Sannie had not expected. He wanted to engage in more and more difficult shenanigans and chase after elusive and sometimes dangerous prey. It frightened her sometimes, but she buried the thought, reminding herself that she was no better than him.

*We make a living out of frightening people.*

Ivan had begun to unpack the contents



of their loot one by one. One of the bags, belonging to a Madame Sierra, released nothing but a knotted jumble of clothing. Ivan shook the pieces of cloth apart with a deepening frown.

“Not one piece of useful metal in this one,” he said. “This cloth looks real fancy, though.”

“Gimme,” Sannie said, reaching forward with her palms. The clothes were indeed beautiful. A deep emerald fitted jacket sat nestled with two long, red, flowy skirts and about a dozen white blouses. The bag also contained a gorgeous floral shawl and a feathery, dark green hat.

“You’d be a real looker in those,” Ivan commented, making Sannie blush furiously.

“This cloth really is incredible,” Sannie said. “I figure this’d sell for good money in the right town.”

“Why would someone have such

expensive clothes and not a lick of money?” Ivan wondered grumpily, opening up a second bag. The dust sitting on his wavy blonde hair trickled down into the bag.

“What *are* these?” he wondered, letting the contents of the bag tumble out. The clanging of several pieces of metal hitting the stony floor filled the cave. Sannie eyed the nearly three dozen trinkets and locketts that fell out of the bag in awe.

“Oh my God!” she cried, hastily reaching forward to pick one of them up.

“Please, God, let it be silver,” Ivan said, reaching for an amber-encrusted amulet.

“It’s not,” Sannie said with disappointment filling her voice. “This is as fake as it gets. Just brass polished to look like silver and gold.”

“The brass could sell,” Ivan thought out loud. “My connections might know of a smelter in need of some metal. This’d weigh,

how much—”

“Wait, why is this woman carrying so many trinkets?” Sannie wondered, narrowing her eyes.

Ivan shrugged. “Who cares? She’s a woman of means, clearly, so she splurges.”

“A woman of means would never buy these cheap artifacts,” Sannie replied. “Anyone can see they’re made of cheap brass and tin. And she’s purchased so many of them, I think she might have intended to sell them.”

“You think someone would buy these?” Ivan asked distastefully. “They’re sorta...”

“Ugly, I know,” Sannie finished. “There’s only one way anyone is paying more than a pittance for one of these.” Sannie grinned as it occurred to her. “The lady in the grey cloak that was sitting beside me mentioned that she was a spiritualist.”

“A what?”

“A fortune teller, a soothsayer,” Sannie explained. “Someone that can tell folks their future and offer them *remedies*—a” She waved a turquoise amulet in his face. “—For their perceived problems.”

“You’re telling me you were traveling with another bunko artist?” Ivan cackled with amusement. “Oh, she must have had a blow-up when we stole her loot!”

“Got to be it, I mean fortune telling is total bosh,” Sannie said, turned the amulet over in her fingers thoughtfully. “I think she might be dressing up in all these riches to con the city folk out of their cash.”

“Ay, where’s that ruby brooch?” Ivan asked suddenly, prompting Sannie to look up from her reverie. “The shiny one that old lady had. Where is it?”

“Isn’t it in the bags?” Sannie asked innocently.

“No, it isn’t!” Ivan cried as he emptied the bags on the ground one after another. “This one’s just a bunch of mail and so is this one!” He turned to her with a dark look, his blonde fringe falling over his suspicious eyes. “Where is it?”

“I- I don't know, Ivan,” Sannie replied, injecting a hint of surprise in her tone.

“You don't know? How can you not?” His voice was getting louder. “You’re the one that took it from her!”

“I don't know where it is. I must have dropped it on the run—”

“You’re lying,” Ivan snapped, stepping closer to her. “There’s no way you’d be that careless.”

“People make mistakes, Ivan,” Sannie replied, giving him her most reproachful gaze.

“Don't you go making eyes at me, missy,” he growled. “If you have the brooch and you plan to do away with it yourself—”

“Ivan, how can you say such a thing?” Sannie demanded, a bout of anger flushing through her body. Her fists curled up at her side. “Do you honestly think so little of me?”

“Well, where is the brooch then?” His nostrils were flared and turning red.

“I told you that *I don't know*.”

“Then I suppose you wouldn't mind stripping down so I can make sure you haven't hidden it in your skirt, eh?” he challenged her impulsively.

Sannie gasped and pulled away from him, stung by his caustic words. “You are *indecent*.”

“Well, you aren't exactly a lady.”

His retort brought tears to her eyes—the same ones she'd been fighting all day. No, she wasn't a lady, and everyone knew that. She was a thief and a robber, and she made a living out of deceiving people. Was it really so shocking that Ivan didn't trust her?

*I am as much a liar as he is.* A sob escaped Sannie's tightly shut lips, in spite of her.

“Aw, Sannie, I...” Ivan trailed off guiltily, his guilt softening his tone. “I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean that.”

“Yes, you did,” Sannie said, facing away from him resolutely.

She felt Ivan's cool palm touch the base of her cheek as he made her meet his gaze.

“I'm telling you, I didn't mean it,” he repeated, his eyes boring deep into hers. “All right?”

Sannie gulped and swallowed mutely. Ivan pulled her toward him in a loose hug, placing a palm on her silky brown hair.

“Let’s get a fire going,” he said softly as he pulled away. “We can get some food in us while we figure out the next heist.”

Sannie sighed heavily as Ivan turned away to start a fire. *Another day, another heist. Another way to maybe die a sudden death, alone and with my body riddled with bullets.*

Her heart clenched with dread.

*Is that all that’s waiting in my future?*





# Chapter Two

## *A Witch's Disguise*

### ***Sannie***

Sannie breathed in deeply through her nostrils, grinding her teeth together. It took all her patience to continue to sit there while Ivan pitched her his old ideas, somehow thinking she might change her mind about them.

“Strauss, Michael, Caleb—they’re all in for it,” he explained. The flickering light of the fire hit his irises eerily. He was both eager and short on patience. “They’ve got the nab on an heiress from Marshall that’s travelling south. With the five of us, that stagecoach has no chance of getting away.”

“Are you talking about *the* Jennifer Porter?” Sannie asked him, crossing her arms.

“Yes.”

“No way, that’s too dangerous.”

“Dammit, Sandra, that’s what you always say!”

“The Porters? Are you serious?” Sannie stood up, brushing her long, dark hair aside. “Do you really think that wealthy woman’s driver won’t be armed? News of stagecoach robberies has reached beyond the country!”

“Any decently stocked stagecoach would be armed, Sannie,” Ivan said, throwing up his arms. “We can’t let that deter us anymore!”

“Absolutely not!” Sannie fumed. “The last three clans of robbers that tried to rob the Porters all *died*. It’s a fool’s errand.”

“We can’t feed ourselves on letters and cheap trinkets!” Ivan snapped. “We’ve got to make a real living!”

“Why does it have to be another stagecoach robbery?” Sannie asked, walking toward him. Ivan snorted and pulled away.

“Why can’t we find another way?”

“I told you we could rob banks, but you refused to do that, too.” Ivan spat out a tiny stick he’d been chewing on. “What do you want, San? You want to move to a town and get a job like the normal folk? ‘Cause that’s a dream that’s never coming true.”

His words brought tears to Sannie’s eyes. She tightened her lips, pulling her chin up in defiance. “I refuse to spend my life as a career criminal and end up dead, *alone*.”

Ivan’s eyes glimmered. “You have no faith in me, do you?”

His question surprised Sannie. She took a step back, fumbling to find the answer.

“You don’t trust that I can take care of us, that I can keep us safe!”

“It is not that, and you know it,” Sannie clarified, raising her palms gently. “I just... I

get frightened, Ivan. Is that really so shocking to you?"

"Fear is a rich man's luxury." Ivan's voice was hollow.

"I don't want to die chasing food like a *dog!*" Sannie cried.

"Remember that when we're actually starving!"

"We can use our wits, we don't need our guns," Sannie said strongly, placing her hands on her hips.

"Well, put your wits to it then," Ivan mumbled, turning away from her to crouch by the fire. "Just quit nagging me about it."

Sannie watched him stoke the fire with a small piece of wood, his back turned resolutely to her. Ivan liked to shut down when he couldn't see a way to win an argument. That worked perfectly well for

Sannie, because it gave her plenty of time to think.

She trotted over to Lady and stroked her head lovingly. The horse looked deep into her eyes with her large brown orbs. The color of her eyes and the soul behind them reminded Sannie so much of herself. Lady was her best friend. A kindred spirit.

“It’s been a rough day,” Sannie said to her.

The horse snorted lightly in response, nuzzling her neck against Sannie’s face. Sannie pulled a hairbrush from her bag and began to gently caress Lady’s hair, letting her mind wander.

*“You’re here!” Sannie cried as she saw Roy jogging through the doors of a new tavern they’d found. “How did it go in there?”*

Roy ran over to her with boisterous laughter etched on every line of his young, handsome face. A small cloth pouch jiggled in his hands as he waved it before her.

“Those drunks were lousy at poker! Next month’s loot,” Roy said with his casual, cocky grin. Sannie felt her heart race at the sight of it. “You know what this means?”

Sannie grinned widely, skipping on the spot. “We’re getting off the road?”

“We’re getting off the road!” Roy cried. “We can find a new town, stay at a nice inn for a while, sleep in an actual bed, have a real tasty breakfast—”

Sannie rushed into his arms and wrapped hers around his body, wrapping him into a tight hug. Roy returned her affections, pulling her close to him lovingly. Sannie breathed in deeply, letting his warmth infiltrate her. He’d only been away for a few hours, playing cards at the nearby tavern, but she’d missed him terribly. Roy was her only friend and family, and being near him was

*more than second nature to Sannie now.*

*“I still don't get why I couldn't come today,” Sannie said, pouting as she pulled away from him.*

*“Darlin', you're just too darned beautiful,” Roy said with a sigh, brushing a lock of her hair aside. “That's your only curse. This isn't a nice town. Those men in there would never take well to losing to a woman.”*

*“All the more reason I want to cheat them.”*

*Roy laughed out loud. “I just love how vicious you are, but no.” Roy shook his head, his crystal blue eyes shimmering. “I can keep finding gold. I've only got one of you.”*

*“Will you hand me the salt?” Ivan asked, interrupting Sannie's reverie. “I left the bag in the pile by the saddles.”*



Sannie turned to the pile of bags on the ground in which they'd stashed their loot. She could see the dark brown leather of Ivan's pack under the haul. Bending down, she began to pull the loot apart to get to his bag. Her fingers touched the silken material of Madame Mildred's robes and a thought occurred to her.

*Fortune telling is total nonsense, I'm sure of it, she thought to herself, turning the cloth over in her hand. If Madame Mildred could pull off this scam ... can I?*

"Sannie, the salt?" Ivan prodded in an annoyed tone.

"Ivan," Sannie began. "I have an idea."

"Is the idea to give me some salt for my chicken right here?"

"Seriously, *listen*," Sannie hissed, shifting closer to him. "If Mildred could run this scam in some town, why can't we?"

“What scam?” Ivan asked in confusion.  
“Who’s Mildred?”

“Mildred—the woman in my stagecoach who was a fortune teller—she had to be cheating people into believing her. If she can do it, why can’t we?” She rustled through the items they’d acquired during the heist. “Look! We’ve got her outfits, her trinkets and her fake jewels! All the things I need to convince someone that I’m a wealthy woman who is good at her profession, even if it’s that of a soothsayer.”

Ivan’s blonde eyebrows pulled together under his hat. “I don’t know, Sannie. I ran a potion-making scam in a town in the north a while back ... and it’s real tough.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be easy—”

“It’s *very* hard,” Ivan interrupted. “And that’s out in the country, where no one knows jack. Book learnin’ folk are gonna catch our wind within days.”

Sannie turned away, walking around their tiny cave with her legs fueled with adrenaline. *He's right. People are not gonna trust some yokel off the street who says she can see the future. I have to prove my skill at least thrice for them to believe me. But how? How can I do that?*

"Have you ever run a soothsaying scam?" Sannie asked him, stroking her chin.

"Never, 'cause it's stupid to try," Ivan replied evenly. "The future is a murky beast."

Sannie ignored his comment, her mind racing. "What about the potion-making scam? How did you convince people that your potions worked?"

"Well, that was different," Ivan said with a shrug. "People came to me with all kinds of bodily troubles and I'd only give them the remedy if I knew they were gonna get fixed up anyway. I knew my prediction was gonna be right."

At that exact moment, Sannie took a turn and her eyes landed on the bags neither she nor Ivan had paid any attention to. They were the two bags from the stagecoach that were full of mail. Letters filled with cherished stories and much-awaited news sent from across the country to loved ones...

Sannie jogged over to the bags and bent down, her hands sorting and grabbing through the mail.

“What are you doing?” Ivan asked with exasperation.

“This mail... This mail is all headed for Little Rosa,” Sannie said as she checked the envelopes one by one.

“I thought the stagecoach was going to St. Louis?” Ivan questioned.

“It was collecting letters along the way, I think. Its last stop must be Little Rosa. The stagecoach will probably head down there in a few weeks.” Sannie stood up slowly, her heart

pumping as her plan finally began to fall together. “Weeks from now, the stagecoach would have reached Little Rosa with these letters. Thoughts and events that people won’t hear about because *we’ve* got the letters.”

“What are you sayin’, doll?” Ivan asked quizzically.

“I’m sayin’ we go through all these letters, one by one, memorize every single line and name and event, and then go to Little Rosa and really freak some folks out.” Sannie grinned. “I’ll tell them news they’ve been waiting to hear for months! I’ll literally predict the future! What’s more, when the news is gonna be good and we know it, you could prescribe some potion or remedy to the person in need. When they finally get good news, they’re bound to think your potion made it happen! Even the book readin’ folk won’t be able to fault us!”

Ivan let out a loud laugh, clapping his hand against the cave’s rough floor. “Jesus Christ, Sannie, you really do have the devil’s brain.”

“Don't I know it,” Sannie mumbled to herself, her eyes falling back to the fire. “We can go to Little Rosa, get off the road, we can sleep in a bed... We can be *safe*, Ivan.”

“It's ruddy brilliant!” Ivan agreed, his eyes glinting. “We'll make a ton of gold and be back on the road before anyone is the wiser!”

“We'll spend *some* time there,” Sannie insisted, her heart fluttering at the idea of not being on the run for a while. “It's not like we'll leave in just a couple of weeks, right?”

“We'll stay as long as we need to,” Ivan said, pulling his bag out of the pile on the ground. “You know staying in one place isn't good for a bunko artist.”

“Right,” Sannie said, biting her lip. *It's okay. It's still weeks off the road, maybe even a month. I can figure something out by then. Maybe even get a job somehow. If only there's a way to collect enough money so I can get off the road forever...*

Sannie stiffened as Alice's story from earlier echoed in her mind.

*"The last I heard was that they were in Little Rosa, right here in Texas," Alice chuckled. "Can you believe it? A hundred priceless diamonds."*

"Little Rosa is the place Alice mentioned," Sannie said suddenly, looking up at Ivan.

"Who's Alice?" Ivan asked through a mouthful of chewy bread.

"The old woman in the stagecoach with the ruby brooch," Sannie said in a mournful tone, remembering the lady's kind smile and merry tales.

"I bet you that soothsaying Mildred pilfered that locket at the last minute," Ivan said in a malicious tone.

“Alice told me a story about Little Rosa,” Sannie continued, ignoring his theory. “It was about these diamonds that someone gave to some bandit in Victoria.”

The piece of wiry chicken meat that was in Ivan’s hand crashed onto the floor with a pathetic flop. Ivan looked up slowly from the bread in his other hand, his eyes widening as they met Sannie’s.

“Are you talking about the Widow’s Diamonds?” he asked slowly.

“Alice called them Victoria’s Diamonds,” Sannie said unsurely.

Ivan stood up. “The Widow’s Diamonds were given to the bandit *in* Victoria. That guy was a *master* thief. Every crook I know knows about him! The legendary Alvar Grimes! He’s turned into a city legend?”

“Yeah, Alice told that story to her kids. She called it a fable.” Sannie bit her lip. “She said he wiped out an entire population just for



some diamonds, Ivan.”

“How many diamonds? Did she say how many?” Ivan asked, his pale fingers pulling together so they touched at the tips. “Tell me *exactly* what said.”

Sannie let out a breath. “Okay... Um, she said this bandit—he was unnamed—got one hundred priceless diamonds from ... a king? A sheriff?” Sannie scratched her head. “I don't think she mentioned who gave him the diamonds.”

“Go on,” Ivan prodded her.

“Well, she said he got the gift and then it got passed down in his family. The diamonds have supposedly stayed in Little Rosa and others have heard of them and seen them—”

“They have?” he interrupted.

“Yes. Alice herself believed the story

was real. She thinks the diamonds are still in Little Rosa in the house of—”

“Some widow, yes?” Ivan asked with a strange fire burning in his cold grey eyes. “The widow with the largest house in the town.”

“I don't know about the largest house.”

“With knights of gold and red, green gardens,” Ivan recited, as though from a poem. “Barry from the old train robbery gang left off to follow the diamonds once. When he found us again months later, he was dyin’ of an infection. He said he got near the widow’s gardens but the dog got him bad. The wounds were festered.”

Sannie listened to Ivan’s tale in amazement. “He really found the widow’s house?”

“He said he met her, and that she even confessed to having the diamonds!” Ivan laughed, as though he wasn’t trying to remember a dying man’s words. “He was

right! The old codger was bloody right!"

"He died trying to get those diamonds?" Sannie asked in a small voice.

"Oh, Barry was the most lame-brained of our little group. He probably charged right into the widow's house like a maniac." Ivan shook his head. "You'd have to be real stupid to have a gun on you and still be mauled by a dog."

"Perhaps his first instinct wasn't to reach for a deadly weapon," Sannie said slowly.

"Well, he paid for that, didn't he?" Ivan asked, uncorking a bottle of crude wine that he'd stolen from the driver's keep. He took a long swig. "Ah, this is shit. You want some?"

"No, thank you," Sannie said politely, her eyes roaming over the letters. "We can do this, Ivan. We can go to Little Rosa and set up our little store, all the while searching for the diamonds. At worst, we'll get a few months off

the road, at best...”

“At best it’s diamonds, baby! *Diamonds!*” Ivan crowed.

“We could leave this life forever!” The letter shook in Sannie’s trembling fingers. “We could stop terrorizing people to get our way. We could settle down somewhere, maybe marry, have a life...”

“Oh, darlin’ you’re not thinking far enough.” His voice dripped with greed. “With those diamonds, the world is ours. It’s open to us! What you’re thinking is just one possibility.”

*But it’s the one I want*, Sannie thought to herself mutely, turning back to the letter.

“Ay.” Ivan’s voice drifted closer to her as he approached her. “I’m not sayin’ we’re never settlin’ down. Okay?”

Sannie nodded, keeping her eyes to the

ground.

“Sannie,” Ivan cooed. “You know I want to settle down someday, too. But we gotta make full use of the opportunities life throws at us. It’ll be good, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Sannie said, finally looking up to give him her trademark innocent smile.

Satisfied with her response, Ivan turned away to go and brush Jackal.

*Roy was the only one that look never worked on,* Sannie thought as she watched Ivan walk away from her.

The instant his name came to mind, Sannie could feel herself freeze. It had been four years since ... the incident, and even now it hurt to think of him. His name—such an innocent, mono-syllabled entity—brought with it a gush of memories each time. Memories that tugged at strings that ran to Sannie’s core.

*I wonder if Roy's still alive,* Sannie questioned for the millionth time.

“Sannie? Lady’s fussing, can you tend to her?” Ivan called her attention.

“Oh yeah!” Sannie swore, picking the pile of berries she’d collected out of her bag. “I forgot to feed her in all this chatter.”

“You do get a bit worked up,” Ivan commented snidely as she nuzzled Lady’s face.

“Says the man who shot an unarmed person,” Sannie snapped, grateful that her face was hidden behind Lady’s.

Ivan laughed out loud, sending a wave of shock through Sannie. *Does he think it's funny?*

“You’re right, I did do that,” Ivan finished, chuckling all the while. “Oh, what a crazy day.”

Sannie peeped at him furtively. “So, we’re going to Little Rosa?”

“Yes, we are,” Ivan said firmly. “We’ll ride out first thing in the morning. We have to pick up my stash of potion supplies from my hiding spot.”

“Okay, got it,” Sannie said with a smile. “I’ll be up and ready before the sun is up—I wanna ride fast and reach the town as soon as possible.”

“Don’t worry, Sannie,” Ivan said with a crooked smile. “The tough part is over now. We’ve got a banger of a plan. It’s just going to be comfy beds and fancy food for a while now.”

Sannie sighed, letting herself feel an inkling of that excitement once again. *Better feel it now, while things are going up.*

“Hmmm,” Ivan hummed, poking his head out of their cave, his eyes flitting back to watching Jackal’s twitching nose. “I think the

wind's chasing us—it's about to rain, darlin'!"

Joy swelled in Sannie's heart. She pictured the green, wavy prairies in her mind clearly and sighed—she knew that when she rode out of their cave tomorrow morning, she would be home





# Chapter Three

## *Big Fish, Small Pond*

### **Roy**

Steely, cold rain battered down on the thirsty prairies, soaking the grass under the torrential downpour. Sheriff Roy Harting watched the grey slabs of rain slamming against his window pane, his crystal blue eyes seeing far beyond the cloudy glass.

Last night's nightmare played back in his mind, as it did every morning. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept dreamlessly. Each dream was different, with a myriad of situations twisting together to create a nonsensical tale. The one thing that was common in them all was his companion.

*Sannie.*

Roy's eyes rolled up to the ceiling as the unforgettable memory of her large, vivid brown eyes assaulted his mind. More than the

image of them, he recalled the sensation of looking into their depths and knowing he was home.

*Is she still alive?* Roy wondered, as he did every single day.

The impossibility of finding out swooped through him like a wave and he sat up on his bed with a jerk, his feet touching the cold ground beneath him. He ran a hand through his sweat-ridden hair, trying to rid his mind of the images that flashed through it. He sighed as his soles pressed against the cool ground. The temperature difference helped. His eyes turned up to his wall clock.

*5 am. Up before my time once again.*

The townsfolk in Little Rosa considered Roy a bit of an enigma. “Last to bed and the first to rise,” they’d say as they awed over his shocking punctuality.

*They don’t know I’m always on time because I can never sleep in. If only they knew—*

A hard knock on the door of his house stopped Roy from finishing his thought. *Who could it be at this hour?* Frowning, Roy put on his pants and a white cotton shirt. He strode over to his door and yanked it open, wondering whether or not he should bring his gun along.

When the door flew open, Roy saw Logan Philip, his junior from the sheriff's office, standing outside, panting and leaning against the doorframe. Rainwater dropped down from his grey hat, falling in pools onto his rugged brown boots. Philip's bright green eyes looked at Roy through the wet strands of ash blonde hair.

"Sorry to bother ya so early in the day, Sheriff." Philip spat out a bit of dust and water onto the side of the road. "We need yer help."

"Where?" Roy asked, turning back to walk into his house. *An early start to the day. Perfect.* "Stay off my rug, Phil."

“Will do, Boss,” Phillip replied as he stepped into Roy’s small, two-bedroom house. He’d only ever been here thrice before and his wariness was evident. “So, I was down by the creek at Dawson’s ranch,” he began, “and the storm last night collapsed an entire row of stables underneath some trees. It’s a bloodbath, that scene.”

“Sounds rotten,” Roy commented, gathering his gun and badge.

“It is, sir. Dawson Sr.’s all in a rage and you might have to speak with him ‘cause he’s blamin’ the creek-side folk for not cuttin’ down the trees when they could’ve—”

“All right, I’ll talk to Dawson.”

“We got a couple o’ bigger problems, sir,” Philip interrupted gravely. “Rubbish has blocked the creek and water’s flowin’ to the other side but none of the fish are gettin’ through.”

“That can’t be good,” Roy grunted.

“You’re tellin’ me. The fishin’ houses are havin’ a blow up!” The young man’s cheeks were red. “They’re insisting that we need to deal with the rubble now before the fish start dyin’.”

“All right,” Roy said, pulling on his suit jacket. “You said a *couple* of bigger problems. Are there more?”

Philip sighed heavily. “June and Carlisle Wentworth’s daughter, Maurine, was out in the storm and hasn’t been seen since. You need to go over there to get the report. They’re insistin’ on you dealing with this directly. They’re trustin’ no one but you.”

“I’ll talk to the Wentworths,” Roy assured him, pulling on his tight-fitted jacket and black hat. “First, let’s go and deal with the dying fish. That oughta get done pretty quick —”

“Sheriff, I don’t think ya get it,” Philip interrupted with a grim smile. “I’ve already

been there since dawn tryin' to clear up the wreck."

"Then?"

"There's just too much rubbish! A lot of wood and broken trees got dragged right into the creek! It's impossible to do anythin' with it with everyone bickerin' all the bloody time!"

Roy raised his hand to clap it to Philip's soggy shoulder. "All right, all right, we'll handle it. Did you get any sleep at all since last night?"

"No," Philip scowled. "Shane Babcock got a new dog next door. The beast goes off every night and ruins my day."

"All right, you need to get some sleep," Roy said with finality, glancing in the mirror to brush his hair back. "Stay here; you can sleep in my room."

"Oh, Chief, I couldn't put you out like

that—”

“Nonsense, you’re exhausted and you’re no good to me in this state,” Roy asserted, giving him a sharp glare. “Let’s just say I’m doing it for myself.”

Philip chuckled. “You’ve got a banger of a day ahead and you’ll need all the help you can get, Chief.”

“I can handle it, Phil, now get some bloody rest,” Roy said firmly, moving to his door. “If you wake up before I’m back, head over to the jailhouse.”

“Will do, Chief,” Philip said with a broad smile, tipping his hat graciously. “And thank you, sir!”

“It’s no problem,” Roy said as he stepped out of his house. “I’m taking your horse. He’s outside, right?”

“Yeah, in the stables near the Orchid



Bar. Give him some apples if he gets fussy.”

Roy nodded his affirmation before shutting the door and stepping out into his street.

The sun hadn't quite risen yet, giving the empty streets of Little Rosa a gloomy blue hue. Roy huddled down into his jacket, striding purposefully toward the Orchid Bar on the other side of his street. The roads were empty and wet, thanks to the enormous amount of rain that had crashed down to earth just last night. A few people had emerged from their homes but they resolutely stayed on their porches. A few of them tipped their hats at Roy as they watched him pass. Roy smiled back, his shoes splashing in the mud as he made his way to the stables.

Philip's caramel-colored horse recognized Roy's scent immediately and began to sniff the air as he neared. Roy walked over to the horse and gently rubbed the side of his head, looking into his eye with confidence and patience.

“I’m borrowing you for the day, Parakeet,” Roy said softly.

The horse snorted lightly in response.

“I know, I know, you hate it when I take you away from Phil. You love him,” Roy mumbled as he saddled the horse. “But I need ya, so I hope you will work with me. The roads look tough today.”

The horse stared back at Roy with an unreadable emotion in his black eyes. Roy sighed as he walked around Parakeet’s body to untie him. In all his time in Little Rosa, he had never tried to get a horse of his own. Whenever he really needed one, he borrowed one from the county stables or borrowed Parakeet for the day.

*I can’t love something and take it with me to face bullets.* Roy’s hand clenched around the rope harder than necessary. *Never again.*

Roy mounted Parakeet and began to ride over to the creek, all the way on the other

edge of the town. The residents of the creek were usually quite removed from the main part of Little Rosa because they could get almost everything they needed near the water. Since it was at the edge of the town, the houses there opened up to the most beautiful views of the prairies. Roy had often wondered if he ought to live there instead.

*Nah, I couldn't possibly eat so much fish every day,* he decided each time.

When Roy finally arrived at the creek and took a look at the ruins, Philip's exhaustion began to make sense. Several townsfolk hovered by the creek, throwing worried glances around and Roy could see the rubble beyond all of them. It was a huge pile of rubbish that rose higher than all their heads. The entire width of the creek was blocked by the jumble of splintered wood, dirt, boulders, and leaves, with a mangled, bloody cat mixed into the mess. Roy cringed as he dismounted his horse. *This is a disaster.*

"Sheriff!" someone yelled as they saw him approach. "Ay, everyone! Sheriff Harting's

here!”

Within minutes the townsfolk had surrounded Roy, regaling him with their versions of what had occurred with fevered intensity.

“The pieces of wood are sharp and dangerous!” one man was yelling. “It’s a fool’s errand to go near it, Chief. The wound could get infected. We could *die*—”

“Not if we move the pieces *carefully*, Billy!”

“There was a landslide from up the hill, Sheriff. It was so scary!” Gina Fey, a resident of a nearby house described to Roy, placing a soft palm over his wrist. Roy cleared his throat and pulled his hand away. “It was the most awful sound. It struck right in the middle of the night but we were too frightened to go outside.”

“You did the right thing,” Roy said to her. Fey batted her eyelashes at him with a

coy smile. “You could have killed yourself had you gone out.”

“I lost my hat tryin’ to get the blasted log out!” someone screamed from within the crowd.

Roy sighed heavily.

It took them all morning to brainstorm a plan and gather the materials needed to execute it. Roy devised a method to pull the large chunks of wood out by tying them to ropes and yanking them away from the creek, toward the bank. He hoped that some of the larger, heavier pieces would fall away on their own, clearing the way for the fish to cross over. It was tricky to tie the ropes to the pieces of rubble; one had to stand directly in the path of the incoming water, which put them in danger of being struck by rogue pieces of debris. There were more than a few injuries in the process, and by the end of the afternoon, Roy’s hands were soggy and splintered, his pants wet and muddy, and his shirt stained with dirt and moss.

They took a break so everyone could grab a late luncheon. Roy scarfed down a quick meal while Old Ryan Hume plucked the splinters out of his skin one by one. The moment he was done, Roy stood up to leave, promising to be back in the evening to finish clearing the rubble. Then he rushed back to his home and carefully entered his room to pull out fresh, presentable attire. He checked on Philip, who was sleeping soundly in his bed, his snores filling his dingy room. Roy checked that he had all the things he needed and quickly left his house to make his way to the Wentworth's ranch.

June and Carlisle Wentworth wept and wailed for their missing daughter before Roy, who carefully noted down every tiny detail they mentioned about the girl's appearance. The mother was positively hysterical, whilst the father held a visibly flimsy facade of composure as he described his daughter's last known whereabouts.

Roy spoke with them, held their hands, and empathized with them. *It is tough to lose who you love*, he thought to himself. He was no stranger to the dead, hollow look that infected

June Wentworth's eyes. The Wentworths begged him to find their daughter, clasping his hands between their trembling palms in part prayer, part gratitude. Roy comforted them as best he could, and promised to spare no effort in searching for the child. The Wentworths stared back at him with awe in their watery eyes.

"Thank you, Sheriff," Carlisle Wentworth wept, the tears in his eyes spilling over his aged cheeks. "Thank you. I know you can find her. You're the only one who can."

"I'll organize a search party as soon as possible, Mr. Wentworth," Roy promised, his gaze flitted toward the grandfather clock on the Wentworths' heavily made-up wall. It was nearly 6 o'clock in the evening. Hastening up from his seat, he bid the Wentworths adieu. He had to be back at the creek to finish the task he'd begun.

The Wentworths whispered fearful goodbyes and teary-eyed requests as they watched him leave. Roy sighed heavily as he walked away from their home, his tired steps

leading him back toward Parakeet.

With barely a moment to breathe in between, Roy was back at the creek, his arms wrapped around a thick, dead log that was weighed down by a bunch of stony boulders.

“Put your back into it!” he howled as the townsfolk pulled the wood with him. The rough surface of the log grated Roy’s palms but he kept going. He could sense that it would start to give way with just a little more effort.

Slowly, but noticeably, the log began to slide out of the rubble. Dust and mud began to trickle down from the newly freed space.

“Keep pullin’!” Roy shouted, his muscular arms yanking with all their might. As the log slid away from the creek, rocks began to tumble into the water, splashing droplets everywhere.

“YES! It’s working! Last bit of pullin’!” Roy urged his tired helpers. “We can do it,



come on now!”

The townsfolk grunted loudly as they pulled the log backwards with one final tug. Water broke through the spaces, spilling out to the other side with wild abandon. As more of the log emerged from the pile, people rushed forward to grab the incoming hulk. Slowly, they yanked the log out of the way of the water. Several chunks of the rubble began to collapse as the log supporting their weight moved away. Orange and grey fish began to swim through the newly formed cracks, desperate for the flowing water on the other side.

“WOOH!” the townsfolk folk began to cheer as the log landed on the ground with a resounding thump.

Roy breathed heavily, his palms resting on his knees. He wiped a lick of sweat off his forehead, watching the scene around him with satisfaction. The townsfolk hugged one another and patted each other on the backs, sharing in their combined effort. Roy suddenly noticed that night had fallen in the time they’d

spent freeing up the creek. As he watched the twinkling lights of the stars come alive above him, he felt a soft hand touch his back.

“That’s a hell of a job you did today, Sheriff,” he heard Gina Fey say as she approached him smoothly.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Roy said politely.

“Oh, you’re too formal,” Fey said with a twinkling laugh, twirling a strand of her jet black hair around her fingers. “You must come by for dinner tonight. We can celebrate how well you serve our people.”

“Oh, is everyone going?”

“No, just you and me,” Fey purred with a smirk. “I was hoping *I* could get to serve the sheriff tonight.”

Roy felt himself flush. He tipped his hat low so she wouldn’t be able to look into his eyes. “I appreciate the offer, ma’am, but I

must be on my way. There are matters I need to attend to at the jailhouse.”

Fey jutted out her pink bottom lip. “Are you sure? You could stay over for a little while, couldn’t you?”

“I’m afraid not, ma’am.” Roy gave her a good-natured smile. Fey had often expressed interest in spending time with Roy but something about the way she looked at him made him feel like she was interested in more than just his *time*. “I’ve got quite a bit of work to get done.”

“Well, all right then,” Fey said with a small smile and a wink. “One of these days I’m bound to get you all to myself.”

“Uh...”

“Sheriff!” Roy heard Philip’s voice call from behind.

Roy turned away from Fey with relief.

Philip was standing by the side of an old stagecoach, dressed in fresh clothes and a new hat.

“I must take leave, Miss,” Roy said to Fey with a final tip of his hat, spinning away before she could respond. Philip looked him up and down as Roy neared, and began to chuckle.

“You look terrible, Chief!” he said with a wide grin.

“Yeah, I know,” Roy conceded, pulling at his soggy shirt. “You’re looking fresh,” he said, motioning at Phillip’s clean shirt and dry hair.

“Thanks to you, sir,” Philip said with a nod.

“Did you go to the jailhouse?” Roy asked. “Any news from there?”

“I did,” Phillip said, pulling a cigarette

from his pocket. "Share a smoke?"

"Definitely," Roy replied.

Philip lit the end of his smoke with a match, puffing out pearly white clouds. "The Wentworths were down there at the jailhouse. They're refusing to leave until the search party is organized."

"All right," Roy nodded.

"There's been a stabbing near Gwyneth's Row, all the way near the southern border. Carl is looking in on it and he'll send you the report tomorrow."

"Got it."

"And lastly," Philip continued, "Millicent Graves, by the west-side border, has taken in two travelers from the outside."

Roy raised a dark brown eyebrow. "Travelers?"

“A couple. They reached the town last night, smack in the middle of a storm,” Philip said, leaning back against the stagecoach. “They say they’re from the country, though I dunno what country folk don’t fear the storm.”

“Did they say what their business was?” Roy asked.

“Well, that’s the thing. The lady... Well, she says she’s a fortune teller.”

“A fortune teller?” Roy asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” Philip replied, his eyes wide. “And her partner cooks up potions to cure people’s ... issues.”

Roy rolled his eyes, placing an arm against the stagecoach’s door. “Are you telling me we’ve got two con artists in our town?”

“Might be,” Philip shrugged. “You

wanna go check ‘em out?”

“No, I need to start a search party for the Wentworths’ kid,” Roy said, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. “I can’t keep them waiting. I’ll take Mark and the group and head out to circle the town. You go check out the bunko artists.”

“You want me to scare ‘em?” Philip asked jokingly.

“Let’s see if they cause trouble first,” Roy replied. “See that they find Tom’s Inn if they plan to stay in town.”

“Will do, Boss,” Philip tipped his hat low.

Roy turned to place his back against the stagecoach’s cool metal exterior. He sighed as he watched his chattering townsfolk from a distance.

“By the way, incredible work here,”

Philip said as he puffed out a cloud of smoke. "I'm surprised it got done in a day. You wouldn't believe how hard it was to get them to work together in the mornin'. You're just good at it, somehow."

"Come on, they were probably all worked up in the morning," Roy said modestly. "They'd calmed down by the time I got here."

"That's true. Except for Gina Fey," Philip added with a chuckle. "She was positively skipping when I was leaving to bring you back."

Roy didn't reply, choosing to reach out for the smoke. Philip handed it to him and watched him puff it with a bemused expression.

"She was probably excited about the landslide," he added wickedly. "Got you all the way across town to her, didn't it?"

"Come on, Philip." Roy rolled his eyes.



“You come on, Harting,” Philip whispered, using the name he only called Roy when they were alone and being informal. “She’s a stunnin’ woman of marriageable age. Surely you noticed her interest in ya.”

“I’ve noticed some signs, yeah,” Roy admitted grudgingly.

“A blind man could see it,” Philip snorted.

Roy shrugged silently. Philip chuckled at his nonchalant expression.

“You know, I’ve never met anyone like ya, Chief,” he said with a shake of his head. “The most beautiful woman in town wants ya and you’re givin’ her the mitt?”

*Aye, she’s beautiful,* Roy thought. Large, innocent brown eyes flashed in his mind once more. *But she’s not the most beautiful woman in the world.*

“Let’s just say I’m no good for her,” Roy said, taking a deep puff of the pipe.

“You?” Philip laughed out loud. “If the upstanding, honorable Sheriff Roy Harting is no good for a woman, then who is?”

Roy shrugged. “Someone who cares for that woman. And that someone is not me.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“I just am.”

Philip leaned close to Roy, his eyes widening. “Are you into ... you know ... the boys? Because that’s not so terrible. I mean, I have an uncle back in St. Louis who—”

“God, Philip, no,” Roy said with a wave of his hand. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” he asked with a chuckle. “Come on, Chief, is it an old gal?”

Roy looked away with a snort, tilting his cap low.

“You have a girl that’s waitin’ for you somewhere?” Philip questioned earnestly. “Come on, we’ve known each other for five years and you haven’t told me anything about your life from before.”

“My life from before has nothing to do with Gina Fey,” Roy said blandly.

“Then I wonder why you’re so sure you wouldn’t like her if you got to know her,” Philip finished, turning away to face the creek.

Roy opened his mouth and shut it. A million thoughts seemed to race through his mind in a second, and the next, he was blank.

“I better get the rescue party going,” he said, throwing the cigarette on the ground and stubbing it with his shoe. “We don’t want the kid getting too far away from town.”

“Alrighty,” Philip said with a slow nod.  
“Hope you find the kid, boss.”

“Let me know what the new arrivals say,” Roy said as he turned away from Philip, determined not to look him in the eye. “Did you find out what their names were?”

“Madame Cassandra and Doctor August.”

“Hmmm,” Roy grunted, his thoughts elsewhere. “All right, I’ll, uh, see ya tomorrow, then.”

“Alrighty, Chief.”

Philip lit another cigarette by the stagecoach, tipping his hat low so his face was hidden. Roy turned from him, his heavy steps taking him away from his partner and friend. It wasn’t that he disliked Philip or didn’t trust him. Roy was simply not ready to face his criminal past yet. The town’s view of him as an upstanding, honorable citizen was one he

cherished greatly. He was loathe to do anything to tarnish it.

Also, it hurt greatly to think of Sannie, let alone speak of her.

*What would I even say?* Roy thought bitterly as he trudged through the muddy grass. *That I reject all the eligible women I meet because I'm in love with someone I haven't seen in five years? A woman who might be in another state, or married or even—*

No. He stopped himself, gritting his teeth. Small drops of water began to drizzle around him from the sky. *I can't accept that she's gone. I simply can't.*

Steeling himself, Roy hardened his steps against the ground, forcing his mind to focus on the Wentworths' missing daughter. He would have time to dwell on Sannie later.

As he turned back to the townsfolk that had come to know and love him, his eyes wandered toward the horizon of the land that

lay ahead. The rain had blessed them with fresh green grass that waved gayly in the wind. The moon beamed ivory rays down to the ground, making the prairie glow. The tiniest of smiles forced its way to Roy's face in spite of himself.

*Sannie would have loved this.*



# Chapter Four

## *Fate and Chance*

### **Roy**

At the early hours of dawn, Roy rode back into the town with Maurine Wentworth's limp body strewn across the back of a county horse. His posse followed behind him: six brave cowboys that had volunteered to search for the girl alongside him. Maurine's family was already waiting by the jailhouse, their feet bouncing anxiously off the ground.

Roy rode with the girl to the physicians while her parents following behind in a stagecoach. When he dropped her off, he explained how he had found her lying unconscious under a willow tree.

"She must have collapsed after hitting her head," Roy explained to them, pointing at a bruise on Maurine's forehead. "She was drenched in the rain and unconscious."



The Wentworths whispered their fevered thanks to Roy, folding their hands before him as though he were God. Roy declined their thanks as politely as he could. He was no hero. He was atoning for past mistakes.

He watched Maurine Wentworth's parents shivering before him, giddy to be seeing their child again, and felt his heart swell.

*This. This is how I will atone for what I've done.* Roy's eyes flickered around the room as uneasy, unpleasant thoughts bubbled in his mind. *If it takes me all my life, I will keep trying.*

"Chief?" a voice called from the entrance of the physician's quarters. Roy turned to see Philip leaning against the door frame, chewing on a piece of straw. "You haven't been home all night?"

"No, the rescue party searched till the morning," Roy replied, moving away from the

bumbling Wentworths and closer to Philip. “We finally found her just a bit after dawn.”

“Is she breathin’?” Philip asked.

“She is.” Roy eyed June Wentworth, who was bent concernedly over the gurney. “Let’s hope she wakes up soon. The physician thinks she will.”

“Ya look like shit, Boss,” Philip said frankly. “You need to get to bed.”

Roy looked over at him with a crooked grin. “You’re tellin’ me. I’m dyin’ to go wash this off and conk out. It’s been an awfully long day.”

“Before you go, I gotta talk to you about somethin’,” Philip said, a strangely closeted expression on his unusually reserved face.

Roy frowned at him curiously. “What is it?”

“Let’s go outside,” Philip said, glancing at the Wentworths before slipping out into the physician’s courtyard.

Roy followed him into the wavy green gardens, his curiosity mounting. “What’s goin’ on, Phil?” he asked again as he shoved his hands into his pockets. The rainy season brought cool winds to the land that swept through Roy’s dark brown hair. He brushed it aside so he could see Philip’s face more carefully.

“Sir,” he began, his eyes trained on his shoes. “Do you believe in fate?”

“What?” Roy asked.

“Fate,” Philip repeated, this time looking up at Roy directly. “Do you believe that there is a fate for us all that we can’t change?”

Roy found the inquiry strange, but he could tell that the kid was being serious. “I’m

personally not inclined to believe that, no,” he said carefully.

“What about chance?” Philip asked. “Do you think ... strange things can happen by chance?”

“Philip, what’s going on?” Roy asked, dropping all pretense.

“I went to see the soothsayer and her partner,” Philip said, his green eyes tightening. “This mornin’. I’ve told them to find the inn as you asked.”

“Okay.”

“They’re travelers and they were searching for a town to set up shop in when they were ambushed by the storm and driven here. They don’t know if they’ll stay in Little Rosa,” Philip continued, crossing his arms against his chest. “If that soothsayer stays, though, she and her partner will open their business here for sure.”

“Are they book learnin’ folk?” Roy asked.

“I don't know. But they have the tired air of someone that lives on the road,” Philip said in a low voice.

“They were stuck in a rainstorm, weren't they?” Roy asked. “Perhaps that’s why they looked disheveled.”

Philip did not respond to Roy’s theory. Instead, he turned away to face the rose bushes, his eyes scouring the scenery thoughtfully.

“You wanna tell me what’s on your mind, skip?” Roy asked, crossing his arms together. “You look disturbed.”

“She told me my uncle was gonna die,” Philip said lowly, his fist tightening.

“She what?”

“The lady, Madame Cassandra.” Philip gritted his teeth. “She knew I had an uncle in St. Louis. She said he was gonna fall mortally ill.”

Roy sighed. “Did she say how?”

“Consumption,” Philip replied, the lines on his young face deepening.

Roy walked over to Philip and placed a sturdy arm over his shoulder. “You don't really believe this bunko artist, do ya?”

“No,” Philip said grudgingly. “But the last time my uncle wrote to me, he did have a nagging cough.”

“It could be the flu.”

“The flu could kill him!”

“Well, it wouldn't be tuberculosis then, would it? And she'd be wrong,” Roy said loudly. He noticed Philip's falling face and

sighed. “I know that was harsh, but come on, kid, you know she can’t possibly know when your uncle will die.”

Philip sighed, hanging his head as a small, embarrassed smile dawned on his face. “You’re right, ‘course you’re right! God, all that book learnin’ does do ya well.”

“I certainly hope so,” Roy replied, giving him a warm smile.

“Gah! I can’t believe she almost got me. That lady was just so convincing!” Philip cried angrily.

Roy frowned worriedly; it wasn’t like Philip to get convinced into believing something so ludicrous. He began to wonder about this woman. Madame Cassandra.

“She just... She knew things, Chief,” Philip continued, his eyes wide. “And she said things ... but they could all just be fluke guesses. Pure chance! She’s quite a looker, too, and lookin’ into those big brown eyes, you

wouldn't think her a liar, that's for sure."

Roy's insides seemed to freeze, and they took a couple of seconds to get back into their usual harmonic rhythm.

*A lot of people have big brown eyes, Roy,* he reminded himself, shoving his hands deep in his pockets.

"Anyway, I'm glad I talked to you," Philip said, nodding fervently. His eyes were full of relief, but there was still a morsel of doubt in there that he couldn't erase.

Roy felt that same emotion stir in him again—the one where his insides would freeze in anticipation and his mind would begin to race. *There is only one person I ever knew that could play folks like this,* he thought, gazing unseeingly at the rolling lands beyond the gardens. *And boy were her eyes brown.*

"What was her name again?" Roy asked. "The lady?"



“Madame Cassandra,” Philip replied, kicking a nearby pebble with his foot. “Said she was from Louisiana.”

“Really?” Roy asked quietly. “What did she look like?”

“Brown eyes, brown hair, tall,” Philip said with a shrug. “Why? Do you know of her?”

“No, I never knew any soothsayers,” Roy said quickly. *Relax, man! Lots of women have brown hair and brown eyes! You need to take a breather.*

“What do you want me to do, then?” Philip asked. “Do you want me to ask these people to leave?”

“Well, did they try anything weird other than telling you about your uncle’s death?” Roy asked.

Philip sighed as he shook his head. “No,

they didn't."

"And they really wanna stay in Little Rosa?"

"Yeah, they said they do."

"Well, let's let 'em have a roof, I say," Roy declared, glancing back at the physician's house. "If they get up to any serious trouble, we'll go after them. For now, let's let 'em be."

"Got it, Chief," Philip said with an obedient nod. "Share a smoke?"

"I'd rather not, partner," Roy said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm dead on my feet. I just wanna head home."

"All right, you go on home, Sheriff," Philip said, grabbing his hand in a sturdy shake. "You had a *long* day, sir. I'll take care of the Wentworths here."

"Thanks, Phil. Wake me up before

long.”

“You got it, Chief.”

\*\*\*

When Roy finally cracked open his eyes, the light outside had already turned to dark. He got up slowly, arching his back to get rid of a knot.

*I must have been dog tired yesterday, he realized. Not a single dream this time.*

Rubbing his eyes with his knuckles, he pulled his sweaty sheets off of himself and hopped out of bed.

*What time is it?* he wondered, stumbling around his room in the dark to find his matches. Striking a match, he lit the oil lamp that sat on his desk. Flickering yellow light filled his room and Roy sat back on his bed, feeling weirdly awake and exhausted all at once.

He pulled his body up and stretched his

muscles, which were sore from all the pulling, tugging, and riding he'd participated in yesterday. Taking a deep breath, he glanced over at his clock.

“It’s almost 7?” he cried as he jumped off of the bed. *Darn it, I missed the whole day! What happened to the Wentworths? Did their daughter wake up? What about the stabbing Philip mentioned? Gosh dang it, I can’t remember where it was...*

Rising to his feet urgently, Roy began to gather his things and freshen up. He quickly dressed in a clean white shirt and trousers. He rushed over to his kitchen to eat some oats, the list of things to do becoming longer and longer in his mind.

A loud knock resounded on Roy’s front door, making him jump.

“SHERIFF!” he heard Philip shouting from outside. “You awake?”

Roy walked over to his door and

yanked it open to be greeted by Philip's pleasant face.

"You slept soundly," Philip noted as he entered Roy's living room, his thumbs hooked into his pockets.

"I was exhausted," Roy admitted, crossing his arms against his chest. "It's nearly 7; why didn't you wake me? There must have been a ton to do today."

"You needed rest, sir," Philip said firmly. "You're always the one that goes to bed last and—"

"And wakes up first, yeah," Roy finished for him, scratching his head. "Maurine Wentworth? Did she wake?"

"Yes, she did," Philip replied, causing Roy's face to break out into a relieved grin. "She's up and healthy and we already have her report of what happened to her when she went missing."

“Well done, partner,” Roy said with a pleased expression. “What about the creek? Is all the rubble off now?”

Philip nodded. “We got a few more guys from the compound to help us. Cleared up the rest of the rubble in a jiffy.”

“That’s great!”

“Yeah,” Philip said half-heartedly. He looked up at Roy with a confused gaze, unsaid words teetering on the edge of his lips.

“What is it, Phil?” Roy asked him warily.

“It’s the soothsaying couple, sir,” Philip said with a frown. “They’re growing much faster than I expected.”

“How do you mean?” Roy inquired curiously.

“She’s already sold trinkets to ten

different people since yesterday,” Philip complained. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a small, gaudy-looking turquoise amulet. “I got this off of Ellie Keating’s daughter. You’ve met her, yes?”

“Matilda, yeah,” Roy nodded.

“She just purchased this remedy for her father being home sick with the flu,” Philip threw the bracelet toward Roy, who caught it with one hand. He turned the cheap brass over in his hands, observing its auburn hue. “Matilda stole the gold from her mother’s purse to get this.”

Roy looked up. “The kid stole from her mother to buy this?”

Philip nodded gravely. “You gotta talk to this soothsayin’ woman, Chief. She’s doin’ a public reading in the town square.”

“A public reading?”

“Yeah, anyone that wants to come up and have their future read, they can. She just looks at their palms and asks them a few questions and starts telling them what will happen.”

“How is she possibly pulling this off?” Roy questioned curiously, his eyes wandering across his dusty floor as his mind churned. “Matilda’s a kid but she’s not an idiot—and neither are you—so how did that woman convince you all that her powers are real? How is she doing this to everyone?”

Philip was silent for so long that Roy thought he might not respond. When he looked up, he saw that Philip was deep in thought, his eyes gazing somewhere far away.

“What if ... what if they’re real?” Philip asked softly.

“What?” Roy asked with surprise.

“Her powers!” Philip said with more volume. “What if they’re *real*?”



Roy rolled his eyes at him. "Are you jerkin' me?"

"Come on, Chief, you don't know about this witchcraft stuff," Philip sniffed suspiciously. "I've heard a few things about these powers in church—"

"There are no *powers*, Philip, just as there is no such thing as predicting the future," Roy asserted calmly. "This woman, whoever she is, is not a witch. If she's able to convince you all that her powers are real, well, she's just an exceptional thief."

"Well, why don't you just go speak with her yourself?" Philip challenged him. "I get all turned around when she starts doling out my future, so you go do it. Maybe all your book readin' has made you immune."

"You know what, maybe I will go," Roy replied, getting to his feet and pulling on his suit jacket. "I wanna see how she's getting all your goats. When's this public reading of

hers?”

“She’d doing it right now, Sheriff,” Philip stated. “She’s in the square, telling people their bloody future right now. And they’re eating it up.”

“Well,” Roy sighed, stuffing his gun into his holster, “we’d better get there before she’s done, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Philip nodded, giving Roy a wry grin, and followed the sheriff outside into the blackness of the night. Two horses stood by the side of the road, their bridles tied to the wooden beams of Roy’s house. Roy saddled the second horse and they rode together toward the town square.

Tonight, the town square was decorated and lit up by lamps and torches that glowed in the dark of the night. A rodeo was being held in the square, along with some local eateries and bars putting out stalls for folks to enjoy. Tomorrow was Sunday, so the townsfolk had come to enjoy a lovely evening out and about,

surrounded by colorful ornaments and twinkling lights. A large fire crackled in the center of the square and two people sat on opposite ends of it, deep in conversation. A crowd surrounded the two women, listening intently.

*That must be the madame,* Roy reasoned, narrowing his eyes at the distant figure of the soothsayer.

“Let’s tie up the horses and get up front,” Roy commanded.

They trotted to the nearest stable and dismounted, tying up their horses. Then the two men ventured out into the merry evening, good-natured smiles plastered across their faces.

“Excuse me, pardon me, comin’ through,” Roy apologized as he dove in and through the crowd, eager to get to the front. The whole environment around him with the dancing crowd, the aromatic foods, and the colorful decorations reminded him of a fair

he'd visited almost five years ago. The last place that he remembered enjoying with Sannie.

*"There she is!" Roy breathed a huge breath of relief as Sannie's brown head popped through the thickening crowd. "I found you!"*

*They'd never been to a fair before—a decision he now wholly appreciated. After last month's successful loot, they'd decided to splurge a little and check out the rides and games at a nearby carnival. Perhaps enjoy a real fancy candy or two.*

*The carnival fair, was, however, a thoroughly unenjoyable place. Teeming with visitors that included a shocking number of screaming, crying, out-of-control children, the fair was like a nightmare in a jungle where the people were trees. Roy and Sannie quickly realized that they were wrong to come to this particular fair. It was being attended by the people from at least a dozen neighboring towns and the crowd near the*

*stands and the rodeo was unending. After an hour of faffing about, Roy had left Sannie alone to go meet with a few other friends for a mere ten minutes, after which he had to spend forty-five minutes trying to find her again.*

*“Sannie!” Roy yelled as he saw her nearing him. Her large brown eyes met his through the spaces in between the crowd and Roy breathed another sigh of relief.*

*“Roy, where were you?” Sannie cried as she came within hearing distance of him. She raised her arms and threw them around Roy’s neck, laying her head against his warm, firm chest. Roy breathed in the scent of her hair, placing a palm against her head. “This place is hell.”*

*“Truly, it is,” Roy grunted, glaring at the crowd around them. “But we don’t have to be here long.”*

*“We don’t?”*

*“Yeah! I found some fellow travelers with*

*Roger and they want us to come with them!” Roy said excitedly.*

*Sannie’s gorgeous face fell, her large eyes turning down.*

*“What is it?” Roy asked, leaning closer to her.*

*She looked up at him worriedly. Her expression tugged at his heartstrings, and he felt a sudden urge to wrap her close in his arms.*

*“Roger frightens me,” she confessed with narrowed eyes. “Why does he want us to come with him?”*

*Roy glanced around to make sure that no one was within earshot. He pulled Sannie aside beside a nearby outhouse.*

*“Look, I know you’re wary of Roger but I think he could help us,” he explained.*

*“Help us how?” Sannie questioned.*

*“By giving us enough money so that we can stop stealing for good!” Roy cried. “So that we can go somewhere and finally get off the road.”*

*“And how is he getting us this money?” she asked shrewdly.*

*Roy sighed. This part would be tough. “He wants us to help him with a robbery.”*

*Sannie gasped, taking a step away from Roy. “You can’t be serious.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“Because we decided that we didn’t want to be serious criminals!” Sannie protested, placing her hands on her hips, her eyes narrowing. “Or did you forget about that?”*

*“I didn’t forget, Sannie,” Roy said earnestly. “But making an honest living means we need to first have money to find a respectable*

*place where we can settle down. Can we do that right now?"*

*Sannie's eyes shimmered as they went back and forth between Roy's. "No, we can't. But that doesn't mean we have to stoop to thievery."*

*"What we do now is not much different than thievery, Sannie."*

*"It's very different!" she protested indignantly. "We're taking money that people are willingly betting!"*

*"But they don't know what they're betting at because they don't know we cheat," Roy pointed out with a raised brow. "How is that not stealing?"*

*"Can a Pinkerton pick you up and take you away for cheating at cards?" Sannie asked smartly. "Because he can do that if you're caught robbing someone, you know."*

*"It's only a stagecoach, Sannie."*



*“A stagecoach!” Sannie’s face turned down with anxiety. “You wanna rob a stagecoach? Roy!”*

*“A stagecoach with tons of bonds and gold!” Roy insisted, slamming his hand into his other palm. “This could be our last scam ever, Sannie. We could take the money from this robbery and go settle down somewhere far away —”*

*“Stagecoaches are sometimes armed.” Sannie folded her arms across her chest strictly, pursing her full, pink lips as she glared at Roy. “Did you know that?”*

*“Stagecoaches very rarely have anyone with a gun on them,” Roy explained carefully. “Roger explained it all to me. Most people don't even struggle, they just give up their goods—”*

*“Oh, and I’m sure Roger knows everything.” Sannie’s sarcasm was scathing. “I’m sure Roger can guarantee that nothing terrible will happen on this awful adventure of yours,*

*right? Roger can promise me that we'll come back alive and unhurt, yes?"*

*Roy's silence was telling. His eyes searched through Sannie's anxiety and he felt his stomach drop. She really doesn't look like she wants to do this, he realized, feeling the familiar sensation of being lost descending upon him.*

*"No, he can't promise us that," he replied honestly. "There's very little chance of us getting hurt, though, because there's so many of us."*

*"But there's a chance?" she demanded, her large, deep eyes boring into his. "A chance you could be hurt, or worse, dead?"*

*Roy sighed deeply. Sannie was a bloody master with words. "Yes. There is a small chance."*

*"Then we're not doing this," Sannie said with finality, turning to move back into the thick of the fair. A juggler had approached from behind them to show off his tricks, but Roy pulled at Sannie's elbow so she was closer to him.*

*“Sannie, come on,” he urged her. “It’s one crime and then we’re free.”*

*“I don’t want to make people afraid,” she said plainly. “I don’t think I can live like that. And I’m certainly not taking the slightest chance of you gettin’ hurt or worse.” She reached up with her fingers and cupped the side of Roy’s face gently. His eyes fluttered closed against her touch and he leaned his face into her palm, breathing in the scent of her.*

*“We can do this without hurting people, including ourselves,” she promised him lovingly. “Remember, I only got one of you, too.”*

*Roy couldn’t help but smile at her final statement. He reached down and touched his lips to the heated skin of her soft forehead. Sannie looked up at him with wonder in her large brown eyes, and Roy stared into them helplessly, forgetting about the plans he was trying so hard to concoct.*

“Chief!” Roy heard Philip shout, pulling him out of his reverie.

Roy followed along behind him, brushing aside the painful memories that threatened to break open and wreak havoc in his mind. *I will grieve, but not today*, he promised himself—as he did every day.

*I can't accept that she's gone yet.*

“Over here, Chief!” Philip said as he waved Roy over.

Giving a few passersby a polite smile, Roy hurriedly reached Philip's side.

“There she is,” Philip said, motioning at the stage with his chin.

Roy adjusted the brim of his hat so he'd be able to see the stage more clearly. His eyes traveled from Kelly O'Malley, a resident from near the creek, to the woman beside her,

dressed in all the trappings of elegant wealth.

Roy felt his breath hitch and then stop.

Large, vividly brown eyes stared back at him from the stage. He felt his mouth slide open as sheer shock rocked through his body, turning his joints rigid.

*This can't be!* his mind shrieked as his eyes roamed over the face and body of the newcomer. Roy shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut, tightening his fists.

*You're dreaming. This is a dream. It's not her. It can't be!*

His eyes flew open once more and zoomed in on the figure of the soothsaying woman. Brown, innocent eyes stared back at the crowd. Roy felt his head spin.

*Jesus Christ.*

There was no denying it, no fighting it.

The eyes he'd searched for over the last five years, the face he'd thirsted for, the voice he'd been dying to hear had appeared right before him. It could be pure chance or stunning fate, but she was *here*. She sat in his town, in his square, in a silken red skirt, a green vest, and a feathery green hat. Her dark brown hair was tied up under her hat into a bun. Her face had thinned through the years, and her cheeks were hollower than before.

But the eyes. They were the same.

Wide, trusting pools of melted chocolate.

*Sannie*



# Chapter Five

## *Madame Cassandra and the Apothecary of Wonders*

### ***Sannie***

#### **Two Days Earlier**

The night that Sannie and Ivan arrived at Little Rosa was meticulously planned and executed. There were more than a few hurdles on the way to convincing a bunch of townsfolk to trust them.

“We can't be caught dead with this hair,” Sannie declared as she tried to untangle a knot in her hair with her fingers. They stood on a green hill with blossoming, lilac wildflowers. They were close to Little Rosa's border, about two days' riding away. The weeks that they'd spent on the road had worn Sannie down and she knew it was visible. She dismounted Lady and began to stroll through the grass, carefully untangling her hair.

“I can't bloody shave,” Ivan said, his



palm running over his angular face. "I keep losing the damned razor."

"I know, I know," Sannie said, her eyes turning to the steadily darkening skies of Texas. She breathed in deeply as a gust of cool prairie wind blew past her. "We need to find a way to fit in with those people. There's no way they're trusting us when we literally look like robbers."

"Why can't we just ... say we're from the country? Who's really gonna ask?" Ivan asked with annoyance.

"People can be very observant, Ivan," Sannie explained. "And the observant ones will definitely take notice of the fact that we look like we don't have a home. If even one of them asks us why, you better hope we have answers on the ready."

"Well, what do you suggest we do?" Ivan asked, dismounting Jackal agitatedly. The horse whinnied at his master's impatience. "If we wanna head somewhere we can become

presentable first, we gotta change courses right now.” Ivan’s blonde hair billowed about his eyes in the wind as he gazed at the horizon unseeingly. “But there’s a storm comin’ in. You see it?”

“Yeah, I see it,” Sannie replied, eyeing the angry, black clouds that hovered on the edges of the vast prairie. When rain hit the land, it hit hard, with forces that frequently killed country travelers.

“That’s the way we gotta go if we wanna reach Little Rosa,” Ivan said pointing a finger at the storm clouds. “And if we want to reach before the storm hits, we gotta ride for Little Rosa *right now*.”

Sannie frowned, chewing her lip as she mulled over the dilemma. *We need to look presentable to the city folk! How do we do that and get to Little Rosa before the storm hits?*

“Wait,” Sannie said suddenly, slowly smiling at the rumbling clouds. “I’ve got it!”

“What now?”

“The storm!” she yelled, jumping on the spot where she stood. “We can use the storm!”

“What on earth are you talking about?”  
Ivan sounded disgruntled.

“I’m talking about the rainstorm, Ivan! Instead of trying to look presentable, we can head directly to Little Rosa, *while the storm is hitting.*”

Ivan laughed at her bluntly. “You got a death wish, darlin’?”

“Hardly,” Sannie growled at him, brushing a long brown lock aside. “We’re expert riders, Ivan. We’ve spent years living on the backs of our horses. We can get through one puny storm! This will really help us; we can use the storm as an excuse for taking shelter at Little Rosa, and no one’s gonna care that we don’t look presentable after a near-death experience. This will work.”

Ivan looked mildly impressed, his blonde hair waving around his cold gaze. "It might just work. As good an idea's any. Though, you realize you just asked me to run through a storm with you."

Sannie gave him a coy smile. "Will you?"

Ivan took her hand in his and kissed her palm. His grey eyes looked up at her with a twinkle. "It would be my pleasure."

They rode for two days and two nights, making plenty of stops on the way so they could be sure that the day they arrived at Little Rosa, they were drenched from head to toe like two innocent, playful puppies left out in the rain. They chopped off the rough ends of their hair and changed into the clothes they'd stolen from the stagecoach to look like regular townsfolk who happened to get lost at a bad time.

Sannie and Ivan were 'rescued' by a good-natured lady that lived by the border of

the little town. Millicent Graves, an old lady that ran a ranch, gave them food, drink, and a bed where they could lay down.

“You kids could have killed yourself!” Mrs. Graves chided while she boiled up a pot of tea for the newcomers.

Sannie and Ivan sat on her woven sheets, soaked to the bone and shivering madly. Water was everywhere, ice cold and soaking into Sannie’s skin. She felt as though her body would never stop shaking.

“W-w-we thought we m-m-might just m-make it,” she chattered, pulling her arms around herself to keep warm.

Mrs. Graves came forward with two clunky bowls filled with hot, bubbling tea. Sannie accepted the bowl gratefully, holding the heated glass close to her freezing body.

“Th-th-thank you, Mrs. Graves,” she managed to stutter, inhaling the tea’s steam greedily.

“So, where are you both traveling from?” Mrs. Graves asked, sitting down on a cozy, patchworked armchair.

Sannie glanced around at the old lady’s house with curiosity, her eyes roaming over the wooden countertops, the shiny floorboards and peeling wall paint. The entire wall behind Sannie was covered with portraits that had names written in the bottoms. From what Sannie could see, Millicent Graves had a *huge* family.

*She’s so lucky*, Sannie thought to herself as she eyed the individual portraits.

“We’re from Louisiana,” Ivan replied, as they had rehearsed. “Makin’ a livin’ has been stiff there and we wanted to try our luck in Texas.”

“All the way from Louisiana to Texas? Wow!” Mrs. Graves leaned back in her chair, tucking a strand of her greying hair behind her ears. “You folks are traveling light for such a

long journey.”

“We only carried our business equipment and a few clothes,” Sannie replied. “We wanted to find a nice town and set up shop.”

“What is your business, then?” Mrs. Graves glanced at their bags and then back.

“I’m a fortune teller,” Sannie said with supreme confidence. “I can read your future.”

Mrs. Graves’ pale eyes widened with a hint of alarm. “Really?”

“I help her make potions and remedies,” Ivan added. “Ya know, for curing people’s diseases and bringing them good fortune.”

“You can do that?” Mrs. Graves sounded nervous.

“Yes.” Sannie shuffled in her seat so she

sat up straighter. "I can."

"That's ... that's not witchcraft is it?" Mrs. Graves asked her in a hushed whisper. "Cause we're churchgoing folk here, madame —"

"I can't tell you how I do it," Sannie interrupted, looking directly into the woman's eyes. "But I can *assure* you that the practice I do is purely a godly one."

"Really?" There was hope in Mrs. Graves' expression.

"Of course!" Sannie said with twinkling laugh. "We just made it through a storm without a scratch, Mrs. Graves. I doubt God would bestow such luck on sinners."

Mrs. Graves laughed loudly, looking very appeased. "Rightly so, dear, rightly so. I'll get you both some dry clothes. You're like two drenched kittens..."



She got up to hobble over to a wooden cupboard. Sannie felt Ivan's elbow nudge her side.

"Luck bestowed by *God*?" Ivan was snickering.

"Will you keep it together, she's right here," Sannie hissed, eyeing Mrs. Graves nervously.

"You know, sometimes you lie so good, I wonder if you lie to me, too, and I just don't know it," Ivan said simply.

Sannie gave him a surprised look, but before she could speak, Mrs. Graves returned with some clothes draped over her arm.

"I just run this humble ranch, kids," she said as she handed them the clothes. "Nothin' too fancy. Ever since the war, it's just been me here alone with my sons comin' and goin'. It's a boring life, but it's a good one." She sighed lightly. "Now, you kids better change your clothes or you'll catch pneumonia."

“Thank you, Mrs. Graves,” Sannie said, pulling the soft new clothing toward her.

“I’m gonna send someone to inform the sheriff’s office and see that they know about you two,” Mrs. Graves said with a small smile. “Perhaps they could help you make your way toward whichever town you were going to.”

Ivan opened his mouth to respond ,but Sannie spoke over him. “Thank you, ma’am,” she said with a smile. “We really appreciate it.”

Mrs. Graves stood up to leave the room, her heavy grey skirt dragging behind her on the ground. Sannie watched her leave carefully, turning to Ivan the moment she had left.

“She’s calling the sheriff,” she said.

His grey eyes were tense. “I heard,” he replied tightly. “Do you still think this is safe?”

“I think so. She trusts me,” Sannie said, turning the shirt Mrs. Graves gave her between her fingers. The material was soft and cottony.

“This corn cracker’s gonna call the sheriff here, Sannie,” Ivan mumbled darkly. “You don’t think that’s risky? What if the sheriff knows of us somehow?”

“How can he possibly know us?” Sannie rolled her eyes.

“We might have robbed him at a different time, who knows!” Ivan stood up, his soaking clothes dripping onto the floor. “The world’s quite small, you know.”

“I think we’d remember if we’d ever robbed a sheriff,” Sannie said sharply. “You really need to relax, Ivan. Getting these people to trust us is all about *looking* trustworthy. We’re here to pretend we’re regular, law-abiding folk. If we wanna play that role, we have to relax and act as though we’re not

afraid of anything. This is normal for us, okay? We're good folk who have no reason to fear any sheriff."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it." Ivan said, scowling to himself. "Why didn't you tell that lady that we were gonna stay in Little Rosa?"

"I didn't think the time was right for that," Sannie said, shaking her head. She bit her lip thoughtfully. "I want to spend some time talking with the people here and then act as though it's *just* occurring to us that staying here in Little Rosa might be a good idea. They'll be happier to earn our citizenship rather than us thrusting it on them. It's a better character to play."

"All right, do as you please," Ivan said, grabbing the dry clothes Mrs. Graves gave him and walking toward the other room. "Let's hope we're not walking steadily closer and closer to our deaths."

"We are safer here than we have ever been on the road, Ivan," Sannie said, unable to

make sense of his cold attitude.

Ivan ignored her comment and shut the door behind him.

*Does he really prefer to be on the road?* Sannie wondered fearfully as she stared at the wooden door that had shut on her face. *He keeps saying he wants to settle down safely someday, but every action he takes, every look he makes... I feel as though he no longer means it.*

Sighing, she began to pull off her soggy clothes and slip into the new ones. *I'll worry about that later.*

When Ivan and Sannie were dressed and settled, Mrs. Graves got them hot, boiling onion soup and bread. Sannie tore into the food hungrily, letting the soup curb both her hunger and her cold. Shivers let out of Sannie's body as she gulped the hot drink gratefully.

"Boy, you both are hungry, aren't ya?" Mrs. Graves said as she poured Ivan a second

bowl.

He gave her a tight smile before diving back into the bowl.

“It’s a delicious soup,” Sannie said to her, wiping the corners of her lips. It was true; this was the best meal they’d had in weeks. The bread was soft and chewy, while the soup was flavorful and filled Sannie with warmth. She inhaled the heated steam, relishing the sensation of sitting on a soft mattress, in a well-made shelter, eating a home-cooked meal.

“You are just the prettiest little lady I’ve ever seen,” Mrs. Graves commented, pressing the center of her palm to Sannie’s chin. Sannie smiled back at her cutely. “What’s your name, honey?” Mrs. Graves asked.

“Cassandra,” Sannie said smoothly. “Elena Cassandra. But everyone calls me Madame Cassandra.”

“Madame Cassandra,” Mrs. Graves said

in a low voice. “Is it a family business, this fortune telling?”

“Yes, it is, ma’am. My mother’s mother started it, back in Louisiana,” Sannie replied cheerily. “This is Doctor August. He draws potions and charms to get rid of the issues I discover with my patients.”

“Pleasure to make yer acquaintance, Miss,” Ivan said to Mrs. Graves, tipping his hat gracefully.

“Good to meet you too, son,” Mrs. Graves said. The lines on her aged face deepened. “How do you ... how do you guess the future?”

“Well...” Sannie leaned forward, folding her fingers together elegantly. “I can read your palms and I can do a reading of tarot cards. In some cases, the tea leaves you leave behind in your cup can be very telling.”

“What do yours say?” Mrs. Graves asked, curiously motioning at Sannie’s empty

tea cup.

Sannie smiled at her and lifted her cup, giving it a pointed glance. “It says I’m going to find a really special place today where I might stay for a while,” she said. She snorted. “I’m not surprised by this reading. After all, I *was* trying to find a new town to stay in. I’m just surprised if it’s Little Rosa instead of the place we’d planned. I suppose no one can *totally* guess the future, eh?” she chuckled.

Mrs. Graves chuckled alongside her, an inkling of doubt infecting her eyes.

*Bingo*, Sannie thought, eyeing her doubt victoriously. *This is gonna be easy.*

“Do you only have cures for the future, or for general issues of the body?” Mrs. Graves asked Ivan.

Sannie smiled to herself. *It’s so good that we rehearsed these answers beforehand.*



Mrs. Graves chatted with them for half an hour before she informed them that the sheriff was not available but his deputy was on his way to visit them.

“It’s been a rough day in town, what with the storm and all,” Mrs. Graves said. “The sheriff’s deputy will just ask ya’ll a few questions, and make sure you find a place to stay.”

“We really appreciate that, Mrs. Graves,” Sannie said with a wide, kind smile. “Folks in other towns have not been this hospitable.”

“It’s quite all right, my dear,” she replied, her ancient eyes crinkling. “You two remind me of my daughter and her husband —”

A loud knock resounded on the front door of the house and Mrs. Graves got out of her seat in response.

“That’s got to be the deputy,” she said

as she moved to open the door.

Sannie and Ivan exchanged a silent, meaningful glance.

*Okay, Sannie thought to herself as she turned to watch Mrs. Graves. I remember the deputy from his letters. Logan Philip. He has an uncle in St. Louis. Correction, he had an uncle in St. Louis.*

Sannie winced. It had been a disturbing experience to read the letters and steal knowledge about these unsuspecting folk. Some letters, like the one informing Deputy Philip about his uncle's demise, made Sannie feel wildly disgusted by herself. She'd wanted to return these crucial letters to the rightful owners somehow, but Ivan had stopped her.

"You can't give away the best of the letters for some do-gooder cause, Sannie!" he had yelled, his grey eyes flashing like steel. "Death, birth, marriage; these are the kind of powerful predictions that will show them you're legit!"

Sannie ground her teeth as Mrs. Graves' front door swung open to reveal the tall, lanky figure of the deputy outside.

"Hello, Philip," Mrs. Graves said in a sweet voice.

"Howdy, ma'am." Logan Philip said as he entered the room. He tipped his dark hat at the old owner of the ranch and then took it off, holding it against his chest respectfully. Ash blonde hair framed his youthful face.

"They're in here," Mrs. Graves said, motioning toward them with one aged finger.

Sannie swallowed nervously as the deputy's curious green eyes turned to her.

*Logan Philip, she thought as she met his gaze with wide-eyed confidence. Son of Adam and May Philip. Nephew of Keith Philip, who is no more.*

The deputy smiled at them and moved forward, his boots clacking against the floor. “Howdy, folks. I’m Logan Philip, I’m the deputy around these parts.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir,” Sannie said, standing up to extend one delicate hand toward him. Philip took it and shook it with a misty smile. “I’m Elena Cassandra. This is my partner, Doctor August Clementine.”

“Hello,” Ivan said gruffly as he grabbed a strong hold of Philip’s hand and shook it.

The deputy’s eyes narrowed the slightest bit. “I was told you guys washed up here in the storm, yeah?” Philip asked, moving to sit down on one of Mrs. Graves’ cozy chairs.

“Yeah, thanks to Mrs. Graves here,” Sannie said gratefully. “Otherwise we might have died.”

“Would you like a tea, sweet pea?” Mrs. Graves asked Philip.

The deputy smiled at her and nodded, and Mrs. Graves hobbled away into her kitchen in response.

Philip turned back to Sannie, pursing his lips. "So, why don't you tell me exactly what happened out there?"

"Well, we've been riding for weeks now and we saw the storm on the horizon as we were coming down, but we figured we might make it somewhere safe before it hit." Sannie chuckled good-naturedly. "Boy, were we wrong. We had no protection when the rain hit. These prairies have the most horrendous downpours I've ever seen in my life."

Philip nodded sagely in agreement.

"Big mistake to keep riding, but the last town we found was full of a bunch 'o mean drunks," Sannie complained.

"We almost got killed just trying to get out o' there alive," Ivan commented from the side.

“What did they want from you?” Philip asked.

“They wanted her,” Ivan said, pointing a finger at Sannie. “They wanted her to live in town and run our business there.”

“And your business is...”

“Fortune telling,” Sannie replied with supreme confidence. “Well, that’s my business. My partner here is an apothecary. Our abilities combined work wonders for people in need.”

“You’re serious?” Philip asked with a raised blonde brow.

“Quite serious, yes,” Sannie said with a soft smile.

Philip frowned. “Why didn’t you want to set up shop in that town?” he asked.

“My partner just told you: The people

in that town were awful.” Sannie cringed. “August and I have been searching the prairies for a nice town to settle in for a while, but we won’t stay in a place that doesn’t feel right. That

doesn’t feel *safe*. When we said we might wanna leave for newer parts, some people there *really* showed their true colors. They wanted my abilities at their beck and call at *any* cost. So, August and I had no choice but to ride out of there, storm or not. Thankfully, Mrs. Graves saw us hiding in an abandoned stable by the ranch and took us in,” she finished.

“That thing collapsed about five minutes later,” Ivan said gruffly. “Mrs. Graves saved our lives.”

The old lady beamed at them in response.

Philip scribbled the things they were saying into his notebook, a small frown plastered on his face. “What is your business

called?”

“Sorry?” Sannie asked.

“You must have a name, right? For your shop?”

*Crap, how did I not think of a name?* Sannie scolded herself as she threw a glance at Ivan. *Come on, think of a name quickly, say anything!*

“Uh... It’s called Madame Cassandra and the Apothecary of Wonders,” she said abruptly. Ivan gave her mildly surprised glance as she leaned away from Philip, satisfied with herself. *It’s got a nice ring to it.*

Philip was glancing between Sannie and Ivan with a bemused expression. “So... You both really see the future, eh?”

“She does, not me,” Ivan clarified.

“And how do you do that, exactly?”



Philip asked Sannie.

Sannie cleared her throat. “Well, I can read your palm, I can do a card reading, or your tea leaves—”

“No, what I mean is, *how* do you see it?” Philip asked, leaning forward. “How do you know the future, say, from lookin’ at this palm?” He placed his palm underneath Sannie’s eyes with a casual move.

Sannie chuckled, looking at him from under her feathery brown lashes. “Are you asking me to reveal the secrets of my skill to you?”

“I’m asking you to prove that you’re for real.”

*It’s time, Sannie realized suddenly. This is the first soothsaying challenge and I have to ace it. Or at least spook the hell out of him so he tells other people what I can do.*

“Then why don't I just give you a reading, and you can see for yourself, Logan Philip, son of Adam?” Sannie challenged him with a supremely calm expression.

Philip straightened in his chair, his face falling. “How do you know my father's name?”

“Your palm is out.” Sannie motioned to his hand.

“Lucky guess!” Philip accused her, slipping his hand into his pocket. “This is a Christian land! Half the men are probably called Adam.”

“Are half the women in this land also named May, or is that just your mother's name?” Sannie asked.

Philip gasped and leaned away from Sannie as though she were a ghost. Mrs. Graves' eyes darted between the deputy and Sannie as she watched their exchange with unwavering attention.

“Names are nothing,” Philip snapped, shrugging defensively. “I don't believe it.”

“Then let me read your palm further. Surely, you've got nothing to fear,” Sannie said smoothly. “You have an uncle.” She touched his palm with a finger. “An uncle that loves you very much.”

“Yeah, I do,” Philip mumbled. “He lives in—”

“St. Louis?” Sannie asked. Philip nodded. Sannie turned back to his hand and let out a gasp, her eyebrows pulling together.

“What?” Philip asked, alarmed. “What is it?”

“Your uncle has consumption,” Sannie said slowly, mournfully. “He's going to die.”

“What?”

“Tuberculosis... It's... I'm so sorry.”

“No!” Philip jerked away from Sannie and pushed her hand aside, his eyes widening. “He’s not dying. You’re ridiculous!”

“I’m sorry,” Sannie whispered.

“Stop sayin’ that! My uncle’s fine!” Philip yelled.

“I wish I was wrong, sir, but I am not.”

“Is this why you came to my town? Hmm? To terrorize and frighten my people? I suppose now your partner here’s got some *remedy* that’ll cure my uncle all the way in St. Louis, yeah? That’s your business, isn’t it?”

Philip was huffing, his chest rising up and down with labored breathing. He stared at Sannie with a mixture of fear and anger.

“Doctor August can’t give you any medicine for this,” Sannie said softly. *I hate this. I hate this.* “Your uncle ... he can’t be

saved. He's going to die."

Philip looked down at his notebook and took two deep breaths. "I'm afraid, Madame Cassandra, that none of this proves to me that your powers are real."

Sannie leaned back, crossing her arms against her chest. "So?"

"Excuse me?"

"What do I get out of proving to you that I'm not a liar? I've done nothing wrong, Deputy. I'm just a regular person that got stranded in your town during a storm. I will excuse you for belittling my profession on what has already been an incredibly stressful night."

"I'm not trying to—"

"And may I just remind you, that you *asked* me to tell you your future," Sannie said in a clear, strict tone. "I didn't force the

knowledge upon you.”

Phillip pulled himself up, his jaw clenching tightly as he surveyed her with suspicion. “You’re right, ma’am. It’s not really my business if you’re just a bunko artist that’s trying to con my townsfolk. Not yet, anyway.”

He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper. He extended his arm to Sannie, offering the paper to her.

“That’s the address for Tom Porter’s inn, best one in town at a cheap rate,” he said formally, without making eye contact with her. “You can stay there till you find your way back to wherever it is you were going.”

Sannie accepted the paper and folded it neatly in her hands. “Thank you.”

Philip got out of his seat and nodded at them both before putting on his hat. “I must head back to see if the sheriff’s search party is back. Mildred, thank you for the tea.”

“Search party?” Mrs. Graves asked weakly. “Who’s missing?”

“The Wentworths’ daughter,” Philip said with a sigh. “Got lost in the storm. Roy’s out searching for her with a few o’ the other cowboys.”

Sannie’s ears perked up as the sound of the all-to-familiar name reached her. There was a sudden spike in the beat of her heart as her mind raced to wrestle down her imagination.

*A lot of people are named Roy, Sannie,* she instructed herself, biting down on her lip to keep from asking questions.

Logan Philip strode toward the front door and opened it with one strong pull of his arm. He hovered at the porch, turning just a bit to the right, as though he wanted to turn and say something to them. His lips were pursed with words ready on the edge.

At the last moment, he seemed to

decide against it. He faced the path before him that led away from the Graves' ranch and walked off, without turning back.





# Chapter Six

## *The Master of Minds*

**Roy**

Roy wanted to scream.

*She's ALIVE!*

Sannie Carson's large, bright brown eyes reflected the dancing flames of the fire before her. She wore a dark green, feathery hat and a long, silky red skirt. Her fingers were wrapped together on her knees as she patiently listened to the woman speaking with her.

Roy pushed through the crowd with a sudden rigor, elbowing his way past the townsfolk. *She's alive, she's alive*, he chanted to himself with glee as moisture threatened to cloud his vision. Five years. He'd spent five years not knowing where she was, not hearing her voice, not seeing her beautiful face—

“Boss, hang on!” Roy heard Philip call from behind him. Roy did not care; the object of his dreams, the best friend that he thought he’d lost forever, was *right before him*.

*She’s alive and she’s here.* The thought nearly made Roy dizzy. He turned up his chin to glance at her again and realized he could catch the sound of her voice now. She was smiling at Kelly O’Malley with the quietest of confidence. Roy felt himself slow down as he neared the stage. A new thought occurred to him through the haze of having found Sannie again.

*Sannie. Sannie is Madame Cassandra?* Roy narrowed his eyes at the stage, his steps slowing to a still.

“I just don’t know what to do, Madame,” Kelly O’ Malley was saying, wiping a single tear off her cheek. “I wanna support his decision ... but he’s my son and I just miss him.”

“I understand completely, Kelly,”

Sannie said smoothly, wrapping her palm around Kelly's. Roy watched her perform with awe. "There is no pain greater than that of a mother missing her child."

Kelly nodded fervently, her wispy blonde hair dancing around her. Philip had rushed up to Roy's side now, huffing and huddling within his coat.

"Aye, why'd you start running?" Philip asked with a frown.

"Shh." Roy silenced him with a raised palm, inching closer to the stage so he could hear Sannie better.

She was gazing at Kelly's palm thoughtfully, one finger placed lightly against her delicate chin, her teeth biting down on her plump bottom lip. "But you're in luck, Kelly," Sannie said with a raised brow.

"I am?" Kelly asked.

“Why, yes!” Sannie cried. “I can see right here that your son will be back in Little Rosa really soon.”

Kelly’s eyes widened with joy and hope, “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I see it. His name is Jack, right?”

“Oh my,” Kelly gasped. “It is Jack! How did you know that? That’s incredible!”

Sannie smiled kindly at her. “It’s my job, ma’am. I see Jack coming back here with his wife and his newborn son. In fact, I see it happening very soon.”

Kelly frowned. “But ... Madame Cassandra, I don't have a grandson.”

“Oh?” Sannie raised an eyebrow. “From what I see on your palm, you will!”

Kelly guffawed in sheer awe of this news. Her eyes screwed up as moisture leaked

out of them. She clasped Sannie's palm with both her hands and thanked her fervently for her reading.

"Is there anything I can do to help him?" she asked Sannie dutifully. "Is there anything I can do to just ... get him here as soon as possible?"

"Time will unfold itself, Kelly," Sannie replied sagely. "Meanwhile, to keep you at peace and keep your future on track, I can recommend my partner's skillfully made stability potion. It will hold you well till your son arrives. An ounce of the potion for only three gold coins."

Roy watched as several townsfolk lined up to purchase a few ounces of the 'stability potion.' He wanted to laugh. *Sannie is still running cons? What happened to her after we separated? Should I... Can I approach her now?*

"What do you think, Boss?" Philip asked him with a nudge of his elbow. "She look legit to you?"

“You mean as a fortune teller?” Roy asked, keeping his hat low so Sannie wouldn’t spot him from the stage. “Not a chance. She’s screwin’ us.”

“Are you sure?” Philip asked. “How did she know O’Malley’s son’s name was Jack?”

“I don't know,” Roy replied truthfully.

“How did she know my parents’ names? How did she know about my uncle?”

“I don't know. Maybe you mentioned it without realizing it,” Roy said, his eyes trained on Sannie.

“No, I didn’t! I remember what I said,” Phillip cried, his cheeks reddening. “I’m tellin’ you, Boss, that woman knows some stuff. She has some kind of ... *ability*.”

“She’s tricking you,” Roy said without an ounce of doubt. *I was wondering who could*

*con the townsfolk with such ease. Of course it was you, Sannie. He watched her flow in and out of conversation with the townsfolk smoothly and easily. You always were the master of minds.*

“Hurley Halloway,” Sannie called, reading out of her list. “You’re next. Come on up, hon.”

“You wanna go get your future read, Boss?” Philip asked from beside Roy.

“Nah, I think I’m okay,” Roy said, focusing on Sannie and the chubby, redhead teenager that ran up to her with gold jingling in his palm.

“You sure?” Philip asked jokingly. “Three gold to know the future. Sounds like a pretty good deal.”

Roy rolled his eyes and shushed him. He wanted to hear Sannie’s next reading.



“You were a ranch hand before, yes?” Sannie asked, eliciting a gasp and an excited nod from Hurley. “Yes, I can see that you spent quite a bit of time there. Tell me, Hurley, what did you love most about that job?”

Hurley raised his eyes to the sky as he pondered her question. “I guess I’d have to say the horses.”

“The horses?” Sannie asked.

“Yeah, they’re just lovely creatures, aren’t they?” the kid asked excitedly. “They’re so friendly and kind. And it feels so good to ride one out in the fields.”

“That’s very true, Hurley,” Sannie said sweetly. Roy knew Sannie was conning the kid, but he could tell that the kindness swimming in her deep, brown eyes was real. “In fact,” she continued, “I think I see something in your future. A new friend. A bond that you will cherish for decades.”

“You do?” The boy’s eyes shone with glee.

“Have you been planning on buying a horse for yourself?”

The kid let out a swear word at that moment, causing several people in the audience to chide him. “How did you know that? Wow!” Hurley jumped around, his red hair flopping about cheerily. “I hadn’t told anyone that! Not another soul!”

“Your palms can tell me everything,” Sannie replied sagely.

“You’re amazing!” the kid crowed. Several people in the crowd chimed in with agreement. “Do you really think I’m going to find a horse soon?”

“Yes, you are,” Sannie said warmly. “And boy, are you going to love her.”

Hurley leaned back and began to clap

loudly, causing the rest of the audience to follow with their applause. Roy clapped, too, but not because Sannie had predicted the future. No, he was thoroughly and utterly floored by how well she *pretended* to predict the future. She did it seamlessly, without a moment of hesitation, all the while adding tiny bits and details that a usual con man would never be able to come up with.

*How are you doing this, Sannie?* Roy wondered again, marveling at her abilities. He recalled another mind-boggling con that Sannie had run right alongside him. The memory was fresh even today, after six whole years.

*Shell, TX. 1864. The barren desert of western Texas blew hot wind through the tented tavern. The land was thirsty and its residents were gritty and rough. This tiny, nearly non-existent town named Shell was bereft of most of the comforts Roy and Sannie craved. There were few huts here, made shabbily and with poor effort. Single, lonely men building the rails came*

by to stay here whenever they needed to. No one stayed in Shell for longer than six months. This miserable blip in the vast, rolling deserts of Texas had only one remarkable thing about it.

### *The Gambler's Chain.*

Roy sighed as he observed the crowd around them. Every person here had participated in a week-long poker tournament, throwing in their hard-earned cash and sometimes even their land or their horses, for only the thrill of the game. These folks were experts, toying with the cards as though it were second nature to their calloused hands. Their laughs were deep and their growls were husky. These were hardened men—far harder than the ones Roy had encountered before.

*Sannie looked like an angel amongst them.*

*She was one of two women in the entire tavern, and the other one was the barkeep. Sannie's luscious brown locks fell in loose curls behind her, and her warm, brown eyes turned up to look at Roy through a set of thick lashes. Her*

*skin was tanned and pink from running in the sun. Her quiet, reserved countenance seemed almost comical next to the rowdy men. Roy watched her with focused attention, anxious for their plan to unfold.*

*You better be sure about this, he thought to himself as he stared back at her. If this plan backfires, we're dead for sure.*

*Sannie's face was as calm as still waters. Roy swallowed, letting her confidence expel some of his doubt. The plan that Sannie had concocted for the Gambler's Chain was risky, perhaps a little genius, and definitely borderline insane. Roy reached into his bag and let his fingers touch the extra cards that he'd stolen from the bar, upon Sannie's instructions.*

*All right, I can do this, he thought to himself. He eyed the tables that were playing; out of six tables that started out, only one active table was left. Three people sat at that table: Sannie, a wily, freckled man named Peter, and Shell's self-appointed chief and expert gambler, Caleb Bixby Michaelson.*

Only three players left, Roy thought to himself, shielding his eyes with his dark brown hair. Time to start the plan.

Backing away from the crowd, so that he was near the back, Roy sauntered through the tavern casually, trying to get near the tables that Sannie had played on before the final. Stealthily, he pulled out a few of the extra cards he'd stolen: an ace, a king, and two jacks. He crept close to the first table that Sannie had played on and stuck the cards under the seat she'd been sitting at.

He fished out two kings and two aces and strode over to the next table that he knew Sannie played at and quietly slipped the cards underneath its wooden surface. In this manner, Roy laid out the trap that Sannie had concocted, making sure that the extra cards were scattered about the tavern in the particular way that she had designed. Once it was done, Roy sauntered back to the head of the crowd. Sannie looked up from her cards, her large, brilliant eyes filled with unreadable emotions.

Roy nodded at her silently. The corner of

*her luscious, pink lips twitched and that was all.*

*“Four of a kind,” Sannie said in a loud, clear voice, flashing her cards on her table.*

*Peter, the freckled redhead, let out a loud moan, throwing his head into his arms. Roy leaned to eye the cards on the table. He had a three of a kind. Peter shoved his modest pile of gold coins toward Sannie with a growl, his shoulders heavy with defeat.*

*“How’d a little girl like you know how to play cards, huh?” he demanded angrily, his cheeks turning as red as his hair. “Are you kiddin’ me with this? This bitch has gotta be cheatin’!”*

*“Aye, Petey, watch yer mouth,” several voices chided from the side.*

*“Sore loser,” someone else mumbled from Roy’s side.*

*“You lose, you get off the table, boy,”*

*Caleb Bixby growled, his voice rumbling through the wooden floor underneath.*

*Peter whimpered and stood up, his eye twitching madly with ire.*

*“She’s cheatin’,” he mumbled, walking away from them agitatedly.*

*Roy sighed anxiously as he watched a few people eye Sannie darkly.*

*Her plan is insane, Roy realized as he eyed the many knives and axes that the men around them carried. Yep. We’re gonna die here.*

*“Peter’s right, though,” Bixby grumbled as he turned his graying eyes to Sannie with a sneer. “You play good for a kid.”*

*“Thank you,” Sannie said softly.*

*“I’m sure you know that if you cheat I’ll hang ya,” Bixby said with a coy grin.*



*Sannie smiled at him. "I don't need to cheat to win."*

*"Deal now," the chief said to Ryan, their dealer. The slightly hunched and nervous-looking boy dealt their cards deftly, as though it were second nature to his fingers.*

*Roy knew that the time was now. He had to make someone notice the extra cards hidden under the tables. Peter was angrily storming past him that exact moment, so Roy grabbed his arm to pull him back.*

*"Aye, what the hell, man?" Peter protested.*

*"Look," Roy said, pointing at the extra cards lying under the table.*

*Peter gasped loudly, his eyes widening.*

*"AYE, CHIEF!" Peter began to shout, calling the attention of the entire tavern. Roy*

*sighed with relief. The timing was perfect. “CHIEF BIXBY, get over here!”*

*The sound of chairs hurriedly scraping on the ground reached Roy’s ears. His eyes flickered back to Sannie, who rose from her chair and followed Bixby across the room as he rushed to inspect the source of the commotion.*

*“What’s goin’ on, Pete?” he demanded in a booming voice.*

*“Aye, look right over here. Look at what we got! It’s extra cards under the tables!” Peter was practically jumping as he turned to face Sannie, waving the extra cards he found around. “Hidden cards! Now, how ‘bout that?”*

*Slowly, but surely, all of the eyes in the tavern turned to look at Sannie.*

*“What?” she asked, the picture of innocence. “They’re not mine!”*

*Bixby’s eyes flickered to Peter, who*

guffawed. "You're lookin' at me? I'm the one who spotted 'em! And how do we know she's not lying?" He pointed his finger at Sannie maliciously. "How's a little girl winnin' all the games, anyway? This is how!"

"You're just jealous that you got your butt handed to you by a woman," Sannie snapped. "You don't have a shred of proof to say that I did this!"

"Oh yeah?" Peter asked with a raised brow. "Let's search the other tables, then! Let's see if there's more extra cards, and which tables they're under."

Several people murmured in agreement, leaning in and around the tables to check for hidden cards. Roy helped them too, pretending to be a part of the crowd, throwing furtive glances at Sannie's figure.

"You see?" Peter cried as the hidden cards came out, one by one. He threw them down on the table before Bixby victoriously. "That table, and that one and that one—they're all where this

*girl played! She's tryin' to cheat us!"*

*"What about that table? And that one?" Sannie demanded, pointing at a few other tables. "There were cards there, but I didn't play there!"*

*"You could've snuck the cards under there just to trick us." Peter waved her off.*

*"There were other people sitting with me at all those tables, sir!"*

*"Well, none of 'em are playin' in the final two, now, are they, girlie?"*

*"ENOUGH!" A loud voice thundered through the tavern, causing everyone to fall silent. Caleb Bixby puffed out his chest as he walked closer to Sannie, the veins in his arm popping threateningly.*

*It took all of Roy's strength to not jump in between Sannie and Bixby. He curled his toes into tiny fists as he watched Bixby tower over Sannie.*

She knows what she's doing, he reminded himself as he watched her long locks wave from side to side.

"Girlie," Bixby growled. "You got one chance to admit yer a cheater."

"If you think accusing me of cheating is going to stop me from finishing this tournament, you're wrong!" Sannie snapped back unflinchingly.

Bixby walked closer. "Did you cheat or not?"

"Does it matter if I say no?" Sannie asked caustically. "I think you've already decided what you want to believe."

Bixby yanked a long knife out of his belt and held it straight up to Sannie's throat. Roy's heart nearly jumped out of his mouth, his entire body pushing itself forward as he felt a wild urge to knock her away from the knife's edge. At the last moment, however, he controlled himself, pulling himself back.

She knows what she's doing, she knows what she's doing, he chanted to himself.

*"How 'bout now, girlie?" Bixby asked with a crooked, cruel grin. "You wanna tell me the truth now?"*

*Sannie had a small smile on her face, almost as if she'd expected this. She looked up at Bixby with mild mirth in her chocolatey eyes. "So, this is what you do when you're afraid of defeat, Chief?" she asked in slimy voice.*

*Bixby's nostrils flared wildly. "What did you just say to me?"*

*"You're frightened that a little girl's gonna beat you, so you'd rather slice her throat than play her, eh?" Sannie challenged him.*

*Goddammit, Sannie, what are you doing? Roy wondered, gulping in deep breaths to calm himself.*

*“You got a lot of mouth for a lyin’ sop,” Bixby mumbled, glaring down at Sannie.*

*“If you’re so terrified of me that you wanna make me out a cheater with no proof, then go ahead, slit my throat and show everyone the coward you are!” Sannie cried.*

*“THAT’S IT!” Bixby howled, shoving his knife right into a nearby table. Onlookers standing close by lurched away from his angry, heaving form. “We’re gonna finish this game, and I’m gonna beat yer ass. Get back to your seat! Now!”*

*Sannie strode over to their table confidently and sat down on her seat, looking up at Bixby with rebellion burning in her eyes. The heap of gold that they’d both collected across the tournament glistened on the table invitingly.*

*“Sir, these kids know slight o’ hand tricks like the back o’ their palms!” Peter cried. “Be careful!”*

*“Come on, you really think your chief is*

*idiotic enough to be tricked by a child?" Sannie asked lightly. "Eh, he could be," she added as an afterthought.*

*Roy sighed tiredly as Bixby spun to face her with his knife aimed right at her throat.*

*"Save it for the game, you insolent little hussy!" Bixby growled as his lips curled upward in disgust.*

*"Fine by me," Sannie snapped back.*

*"I'm warnin' you, girlie, my men are gonna be watchin' you like hawks the entire time," he spat. "One wrong move, one tiny effort to cheat me and I'll cut out your giant eyes and hand 'em to you like marbles, yeah?"*

*Sannie breathed in and out evenly, and thankfully, did not respond. Roy swallowed nervously as he watched four other men surround her and pull out their freshly sharpened knives. Their steely edges glinted in the afternoon sun.*



*“Ryan!” Bixby yelled. “Deal the cards!”*

*“They’re already dealt, sir,” he replied motioning at the cards laid down on the table.*

*“Good,” Bixby snapped. He turned to Sannie. “Shake out your sleeves. Now.”*

*Sannie rolled her eyes and stood up to shake her sleeves around. “See?” she asked Bixby, who watched her every move. “Nothing.” She sat back down on her chair languidly, placing one hand against the deck that Ryan had just put down.*

*“HEY!” Bixby roared, standing up to tower over her. “Hands off the deck! Now!”*

*“Geez,” Sannie whispered as she leaned back into her chair.*

*“Did you see her?” Bixby asked his henchmen with wide, fearful eyes. “Did you see her hand? Did she switch a card? What did she do?”*

*“Nothing, sir, she just touched it for a second,” one of his cronies said unsurely.*

*Bixby ground his teeth together and sat back down in his chair.*

*“A second is all it takes for a trick,” Sannie sang.*

*Bixby slammed his fist against the table aggressively. “Shut the hell up! You only touched it for a second, you did nothing!”*

*“Sure, sure, you can believe that,” Sannie said with a smile.*

*“What does that mean?” he demanded with narrowed eyes.*

*“Nothing!” She gave him a twinkling laugh. “I’m agreeing with you!”*

*Bixby growled, picking up his cards angrily. “I will not let you get into my head, you*

*crone!"*

*Sannie continued to smile at him complacently, her fingers tapping on the table. Roy eyed her form with wonder. What is she planning? How is she going to trick him from here?*

*Bixby noted the values of his cards and set them down on the table. He raised his gaze to Sannie's unconcerned form and his eyes narrowed with suspicion.*

*"Pick up your cards," he barked.*

*"I don't need to," Sannie said in a supremely unconcerned tone.*

*"What do you mean you don't need to?"*

*"It means that I can bet without looking at my cards. That's allowed in the game," she replied.*

*"But ... how can you bet without seeing*

*your hand?" he demanded, bristling angrily.*

*"I don't need to see my hand," Sannie repeated with a slimy grin.*

*"Why don't you need to see it?"*

*Sannie leaned forward and looked at him. "Because my hand is excellent."*

*Bixby growled with frustration. "What the hell is she talking about? Did any of you see her do anything? Lift a card? Maybe switch one? Huh?"*

*"No, sir, we've been watching. She hasn't done anything," the cronies replied. "She didn't slip in any cards, Boss, for sure."*

*Bixby swung toward the dealer. "Ryan! Are you in on this with her on this? Huh? Is it you?"*

*Ryan looked deeply offended. "Of course not, sir! I would never betray my chief; I have*

*lived here in the—”*

*Bixby slammed his fist against the table. “I want to re-deal these cards!”*

*“The deal is done and I have broken no rules!” Sannie said firmly. “But I suppose I can make an exception if you’re that threatened by me.”*

*“You do not frighten ME!” Bixby roared, sitting back down on his chair and picking up his cards. He picked up five gold coins and threw them onto the table. “Five gold,” he rumbled as he placed his bet.*

*Sannie raised her hand and lazily pushed ten gold coins into the center of the table. “I raise you to ten gold,” she said.*

*“How can you raise without seeing your cards?” Bixby was really getting worked up now. His face was steadily turning from pink to a definite red.*

*“I told you once, and I’ll tell you again, I don’t need to see my hand,” Sannie said in a lilting voice. “I know exactly what it is.”*

*“How can you possibly know that?” Bixby roared.*

*“You’re the master gambler. Why don’t you figure it out?”*

*“UGH!” Bixby growled, before shoving a heap of coins into the center of the table. “Thirty gold! I raise you to thirty gold!”*

*Sannie cackled loudly as she called his bet and raised. “I’ll take you to fifty.”*

*Bixby was shaking as his eyes darted between Sannie and her cards. “She can’t know... There’s no way... There’s just no way... Unless Ryan... Somehow... She touched the deck...” he mumbled under his breath feverishly.*

*Oh my god, Roy thought to himself as he watched Sannie work her magic. She’s breaking*

his mind.

*The entire tavern was watching their match in pin-drop silence. With rapid, shallow breathing, Bixby called her bet of fifty gold.*

*“I call you at fifty,” he said, pushing in the coins.*

*Ryan accepted the bets and piled them into the center of the table. According to the rules, the players could pick up two cards from the deck and compare it to the five cards they had in their hand. Upon comparing, they had to decide which cards would make the best hand and discard any two cards back into the deck. Bixby completed his turn, taking his time to discard two cards. Once Ryan placed the discarded cards at the bottom of the deck, he turned to Sannie for her to play her turn.*

*“No thanks, I’m good,” Sannie said casually.*

*“WHAT?” Bixby cried “You... You’re not gonna change your cards?”*

*“Why would I?” Sannie asked, as though he were being ridiculous. “When I have the best hand?”*

*“YOU CAN’T KNOW THAT YOU HAVE THE BEST HAND, YOU HAVEN’T SEEN YOUR CARDS!” Bixby howled, infuriated by Sannie’s peculiar behavior.*

*Sannie shook her head at him slowly, as though she were pitying him. “It’s my turn to bet this time, yeah?” she asked chirpily, picking up her coins. “I’ll bet you another fifty gold coins. Let’s do this.”*

*Gasps ran through the tavern as the onlookers watched Sannie place her enormous, near-thoughtless bet. Bixby watched her raise the stakes with horror and irritation on his face.*

*“I call your fifty,” Bixby growled. “And I raise you another fifty. There ya go, ya tramp.”*

*“I call the fifty you raised,” Sannie said, tossing in the coins. “And I raise you another*



*hundred.”*

*“Oh Lord almighty,” someone cooed beside Roy.*

*Bixby’s body was positively writhing from tension, while Sannie looked utterly calm and relaxed. Bixby kept looking back to his cards and measuring up his coins, while Sannie called the barkeep over and ordered a drink. Her nonchalance was infuriating and frightening, and Bixby’s eyes were bugging out of his head, his forehead turning purple.*

*“I’m finishing this,” he snapped, wrapping his hands around his entire loot. “I think you don’t have no damn clue what your cards are. You’re a lyin’ little sop and I’m gonna prove it! I go ALL IN!”*

*The bystanders of the game burst into fevered gasps and a few even broke into applause. Roy watched the scene unfold before him with tension coiling in his abdomen like snakes. All in. Dear Lord.*

*“That’s right, you tramp,” Bixby continued, practically breathing steam from his nostrils. “Match that.”*

*Sannie smiled slowly and sagely, the depths of her eyes as clear as still waters. She reached forward and picked up her cards, looking at them casually, with no sign of tension on her beautiful face. Her sage grin turned crooked and vile as she shoved her entire heap of coins into the center of the table, doubling the gold in the pot.*

*“I go all in,” she said confidently, looking up at Bixby evenly.*

*Bixby was panting as he watched her throw in her bet, his cards shaking in his hands. He threw them down unsurely, announcing his hand.*

*“Full house!” he cried, to the great delight of several people in the bar, who began to cheer loudly.*

*Sannie threw down her cards, and yelled, “Four of a kind of aces! I win!”*

*The sudden din was uproarious. The entire tavern broke into shouts and applause the moment Sannie declared her victory. The Gambler's Circle hadn't had a solo winner after almost four years. Bixby hung his head low into his hands, his shoulders shaking with the weight of defeat. Sannie began to shovel the gold coins into her bag with an expression of quiet delight.*

*When they left the tavern that evening, Roy asked her what her trick was this time.*

*"I had to make Bixby go all in, right away," she explained to him smartly. "He's a better player than I am, and if I played him for too many rounds, he would surely have won a large sum of money from me in that time. Instead, I let him think that I had no idea what I was betting on. That I didn't even know what my cards were. I wasn't sure if he would go for it then, but he had a full house, and so he did."*

*"But how did you know what your hand was? You could have lost!" Roy exclaimed. "And what about that whole hidden cards bit? Why did we have to do that?"*

*“I knew I could never cheat with all those people watching! I needed a distraction. I switched the cards that were dealt to me,” Sannie said with a proud smile. “This is why I told you to wait for my cards to be dealt before showing someone the hidden cards under the tables. During all the commotion of finding the cards and all the people walking around, I exchanged four of my cards with aces.”*

*Roy stared at her with his mouth hanging open. She looked back at him, biting her bottom lip unsurely.*

*“What?” she asked.*

*“You are a master of minds,” Roy said seriously. “A bloody master—”*

*“Chief!”*

*Roy jumped out of reverie, taking a*

deep breath as he turned to face Philip, who was tugging at his arm like a maniac.

“What?” Roy asked.

“What are you lost on? She’s leavin’!” he said, pointing at the stage. “The madame’s leaving!”

Roy turned to face the stage. Sannie had stood up and was walking away, being led off the stage by a man with blonde, wispy hair. He held her hand and touched the small of her back in a way that made Roy feel a spark of irritation.

“That’s Doctor August?” he asked Philip.

“Yeah, he is,” Philip answered. “Don’t you wanna go talk to them?”

“Yeah, yeah, I should do that...” Roy said, looking around him as though he was searching for something. “Actually, you know

what, why don't you go to the jailhouse and see what's happening there and I'll speak to these two right here?"

— "Are ya sure? I mean, I'm already here

"Yeah, but I don't want her guessing your future again and freaking you out," Roy said lamely. "Go on ahead to the jailhouse. I'll meet you there."

"Okay, Boss," Philip said with a shrug. "See ya later, then. I'll leave the county horse at the stables for ya."

"Nah, you can take him with you and leave him at the jailhouse stables."

"Gotcha, Chief."

Roy turned back to gaze at Sannie's retreating figure as Philip walked away from him. He was glad he'd gotten rid of his deputy. While he was a loyal and trusting

friend, Roy could think of no way to explain what Sannie meant to him, and the place she held in his heart. The last time that he ever saw her flashed before Roy's eyes, and he shook himself to get rid of the images.

*She's here now. Go after her, now!* Roy began to stride forward, following the soothsaying couple with his hat tipped low to hide his face. They said their hellos and goodbyes to the people that they crossed and then took a turn for the road that led away from the town square, in the direction of the inn. Roy followed them toward the street, watching Sannie's smile and her gait carefully. *She looks weaker,* he realized, eyeing the hollows in her collarbones and under her cheeks. He felt a pang of guilt that struck him in place, utterly motionless. This time, he couldn't stop the images. He remembered the way Sannie's body crumpled to the ground as the bullet struck her leg. His heart raced and his breath became labored, his stomach twisting uncomfortably. He hadn't pictured that incident so clearly in a very long time.

*It was my fault,* he thought to himself bitterly as he watched her cross the street with

Doctor August following close behind her. The edge of her burgundy skirt dusted the ground as she walked.

*It's too long for her,* Roy noted as he walked in the shadow of a nearby hut. *If I had to make a guess, those aren't her own clothes.*

“Could you tell me the way to Tom's Inn, please?” he heard her melodious voice sing to an old man standing nearby, puffing on a tobacco pipe.

“It's a short walk. Straight down till the pub and two rights,” the man answered, without looking up.

Sannie thanked him and moved forward, saying something to Doctor August that Roy couldn't hear. Roy waited in the shadows for her get a bit farther away before he crossed the road. He knew he had to speak to her; he knew he promised Philip. But he couldn't do it... yet.

*I can't believe I'm seeing her.* Roy felt a



sudden, wild urge to laugh out loud. *She's actually here, after all this time!*

He tipped his hat low to hide his face as he continued to walk behind them. Sannie and the doctor took a right and disappeared behind the pub. Roy hastened his steps so as to not lose them, huddling into his jacket as the evening turned chillier. He took a right at the pub and then paused.

Sannie was nowhere to be seen.

Roy moved forward hesitantly. He stared at the pub's closed doors with narrowed eyes. *Did she go into the pub?* He took a few steps toward the pub's door and paused once more. For some reason, he had a feeling that she hadn't gone inside. Turning to the right, he continued down the path to the inn, slowly, while routinely glancing in the gaps between the houses.

As Roy was crossing a rocky little hut, he suddenly felt a force yank him back. A moment later, his back hit the wall. The next

instant, there was a knife right before his face.

Sannie's beautiful brown eyes stared at him from behind the knife.

“Who the hell are you and why are you following me?” she demanded, her eyebrows scrunching together.

Roy gazed at her face with awe, breathing in the scent of her involuntarily.

*Five years.* He gasped as he gazed upon her face. *Five years I went without you.*

Suddenly, her face fell. Roy saw it—the instant that recognition cleared the suspicious haze in her eyes. From flat and brown, they returned to the familiar warm pools of bubbling chocolate. Her eyebrows rose on her forehead as her breath hitched. The hilt of her knife slipped out of her trembling fingers, clattering on the ground.

“Is it really... *you?*” Sannie breathed so

low that Roy almost didn't hear it.

He tightened his fist as he felt his throat choke up unexpectedly. Sannie's eyes began to swim with moisture as she gasped for air, raising a hand to her chest.

"Sannie, wait!" someone yelled from behind them, shattering the tension of the moment. Roy looked up to see Doctor August running to them, waving his arms like a madman. "That's the sheriff! It's the bloody sheriff!"

Sannie composed herself immediately. She sniffed back her tears and pulled away from Roy. She knelt down on the ground to pick up her knife and wiped her eyes with her sleeve in one stealthy swipe. Roy leaned back against the wall, feeling shaken to his core. The cool touch of the wall on his back felt soothing.

"Sheriff, we are so, so sorry," Doctor August said, folding his hands together before him.

Roy looked up at him with a level gaze. He was a wiry but strong man, with blonde hair falling around his steely eyes rather shabbily. He, too, was dressed in a suit that didn't quite seem like the right fit for him.

“We had no idea it was you. We just thought someone was following us!”

“Pretty paranoid, eh?” Roy asked flatly.

“Our travels have made us wary,” Sannie said in a high, clear voice. She seemed perfectly composed now, her guarded demeanor returning in full force. Roy marveled at her ability to contain herself; he felt as though he still looked rather shaken. “I’m sorry about threatening you with a knife, though,” she added.

Roy couldn't help it; he chuckled out loud. “No harm done, ma’am. Women of your profession must often meet rough folk.”

“Yeah,” Sannie breathed, her eyes

tightening a smidge. "We do."

"Is there anything we can do for you, sir?" Doctor August asked, tilting his blonde head to one side. "We're exhausted from a long day and we're eager to rest."

Roy straightened up. "Of course. Perfectly understandable. Where are you headed?"

"Your deputy recommended Tom's Inn," Doctor August responded. "We heard good things about it from other folk, so we're staying there."

"Ah, yes, that's a comfortable place," Roy said, slipping his hands into his pockets. "Perhaps I could walk you both to the inn?"

Doctor August opened his mouth to respond, but Sannie spoke up first. "Yes, that sounds good. I mean, we're strangers here. We barely know the way."

“Excellent,” Roy said with a grin, turning to walk out of the alleyway and into the main street.

A horse cart drove by carrying three children and one very sleepy looking man, throwing up dust around them. Roy glanced back at Sannie. She had her kerchief out and pressed against her nose, so the dust wouldn’t trigger a long session of sneezing. The familiar sight made Roy want to smile.

“So?” Sannie asked in a lilting tone, her eyes burning at him. “Where to, Sheriff?”

“Right this way, Madame,” Roy said smoothly, turning to walk ahead of them. When he finally faced away from them, he allowed himself to smile. *Even with a knife to my throat, she’s a stunner*, he thought to himself as he led the way. The night had blackened now, with twinkling stars glittering amongst the scattered clouds. The only light on the streets came from the flaming lamps hanging by the walls of the huts. A few of them had died in the wind, and Roy pulled a matchbox from his pocket and proceeded to

light one of them up.

“You know,” Sannie said from beside him, firelight glittering in her eyes, “I once knew a boy that just loved to run through the streets, putting these off.”

Roy snorted. She was referring to him. He gave her a slight, crooked smile. “I hope he’s not still doin’ that. Accidents happen in the dark.”

“Something tells me he changed,” Sannie whispered.

Roy’s eyes rose to meet hers. She stared at him plainly, with no pretense in her gaze. He sighed heavily as Doctor August approached from behind.

“Quite a lovely little town you’ve got here,” he commented with a placating smile.

Roy nodded blankly before turning back to their path.

Doctor August rushed forward to walk by his side. "So, do you always check on every new person that comes into your town?" he asked.

"Yes, that's my job," Roy replied.

"But a town of this size? You must have your hands full."

"I have four deputies, thankfully," Roy replied as he took a right turn for the inn. He really wished the doctor would walk behind so he could speak to Sannie. Roy threw a furtive glance back at her to see that she was staring at him as she walked, her eyes were boring into his back. The moment their eyes met, she flushed a deep ruby shade and turned her gaze to the ground.

"And how long have you been sheriff here?" the doctor asked.

"'Bout a year, year and a half," Roy said. "How 'bout you folk? Where are you



from?”

“Louisiana,” Sannie said from behind him. “Little town named Butch County.”

“Oh?” Roy asked, raising his brow. “I believe I knew a girl that lived there.”

It looked as though Sannie almost smiled. “Did you, now?”

“Yeah, she was an old friend,” Roy said quietly. “Quite the troublemaker, too.”

“Where is she now?” she asked him pointedly.

Roy looked up at her, but she was gazing down at the ground, resolutely away from him.

“I don't know,” he said with a sudden ache in his heart. “I... We lost touch.”

“Aye, Sheriff,” Doctor August said, pointing at a building right at the end of the street. “That Tom’s Inn?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” Roy said, looking up at the large wooden sign that hung over the motel. “I’ll come in with you and speak with the desk clerk. Come on.”

Roy noticed the doctor’s face twitch into a scowl. It happened for only a second, but it was undeniable. *Someone doesn’t like being around law enforcement.*

“Are you sure you wanna come in, Sheriff?” Doctor August asked with a near-convincing pretense of politeness. “Aren’t we takin’ up too much of your time?”

“Not at all,” Roy said confidently as they neared the inn. “I told you, I’ve got a lot of help from the county so I can focus my energies as I see fit.”

“How lucky,” Doctor August said lowly. “For the people of your town, I mean. It must

be good to have such an involved sheriff.”

“Yes,” Roy rumbled. “A sheriff that cares for his people and protects them is the key to a happy town.”

If Doctor August noticed the slight threat in Roy’s voice, he didn’t show it. With his pointy chin held up proudly, he walked ahead of them, letting Sannie fall into step beside Roy.

“You seem to really love your job,” Sannie said softly as she walked alongside him.

Roy glanced at her, but she still wouldn’t look at him directly. Her silken brown locks swung ahead to hide her face.

“I do,” he answered honestly. He knew what she was really saying to him. *You seem happy.* “It’s a great town, with good people. And being a sheriff is a good, honest living, so...”

Sannie's eyes fluttered up for only a second before turning back toward the inn. Roy sighed. He longed to be able to speak to her freely, to tell her all that had happened in the past five years, and all that he felt. More than anything, however, he wanted to reach out and hug her. He wanted to hold her close and inhale the scent of her.

He watched her as she lifted up her skirt in one hand and climbed the stairs to stand beside the doctor. *She's here and she's healthy. That's enough for me right now.*

Roy followed the couple into Tom's Inn, welcoming the warmth of the inn's bar and diner. Established around the time that Little Rosa was formed, Tom's Inn was a staple of the town, run by the descents of Thomas Weatherby, an egregiously rich man whose ancestors came in on the Mayflower. It was one of the first buildings in Little Rosa to get indoor plumbing—something many other residents of the town would simply die for. While other such inns in town had become pricier and more luxurious over time, Tom's Inn had maintained its affordable prices, thanks to Tom III's firm belief that nothing

was better for business than treating your guests honorably.

“Chief!” Roy heard Tom’s familiar voice yell from across the mildly crowded atrium. “Fancy seein’ you here on a work day. You here for a game ‘o cards?”

“You play cards?” Sannie asked Roy from behind, a mischievous grin dancing at the corners of her lips.

Roy gave her a crooked smile in response. “I dabble.” He turned back to face Tom as the beady-eyed man walked over to him eagerly. “And no, I’m here for work reasons. Let me introduce you to Madame Cassandra and Doctor August. They’re new here. Got washed in by the storm.”

“You’re Madame Cassandra?” Tom asked Sannie with excitement sparking in his eyes. “You’re the future lady!”

Sannie let out a twinkling laugh. “Is that what they’re calling me?”

“Yeah, Ricky Anderson saw your public readin’ and he hasn’t stopped ravin’ about it.” Tom gave her a toothy grin, revealing two missing front teeth.

“Well, tell Ricky thanks for promoting my business, then,” Sannie said smoothly, eliciting a laugh from the owner.

“I was wondering if you could get them a couple of rooms, Tommy,” Roy said.

“We’ll need just one room,” Doctor August said, placing a hand on his hip.

Sannie’s gaze rose to Roy apologetically. “We need two beds, however,” she said, straightening her skirt. “If you have two beds in one room, that should suffice.”

“Give them the room with the large bay windows overlooking the lake,” Roy said casually. “Best room in the inn.”

“Don't go to any trouble. We might not stay here all that long,” Doctor August said with a shrug.

“I really like the sound of that room, actually,” Sannie piped up from beside him. “Might be nice to wake up to a view. What do you think?”

Doctor August sighed, looking mildly annoyed. “Fine, let's get that room then.”

“Excellent,” Tom said, clapping his hands together. “Come on, kids, let's head over to the reception and fill out your details. I'll have Eugene come by and pick up your bags. Come on, now.”

Roy crossed his arms across his chest as Doctor August strode over to the reception alongside Tom. He watched Sannie as she took a handful of steps to follow her partner and then paused, her heel hovering above the floor unsurely.

Roy bit down on his lip as he resisted

the urge to call after her. She was here under cover and he knew that. She was here to deceive and cheat his townsfolk, and he knew that, too.

But none of it mattered. He felt his heart leap when she turned around to meet his eyes with her warm pools of melted chocolate. Her lips pulled up at one corner into the kindest of smiles.

“Thank you for your help, Sheriff,” she said in a slightly shaky voice. “It’s really good to see you.”

Roy smiled at her. “You can call me Roy.”

Sannie’s breath hitched visibly. She gave him a tight nod in return and spun away to hastily join her partner at the reception.

*It’s really good to see you, too,* Roy thought to himself as he watched her walk away.





# Chapter Seven

## *The Plan Ahead*

### ***Sannie***

When the door of their new room in Tom's Inn finally shut, Ivan let out a loud groan.

“Ugh!” he cried. “I cannot believe this!”

“What?” Sannie asked breathlessly.

“Did you not see how nosy the bloody sheriff was? Are you kidding me?” Ivan demanded, his steely eyes flashing. “He got the scent on our tricks a mile away, if you ask me. And then the first time we meet him we practically attack him—”

Sannie couldn't hear Ivan's words. They were like jumbled, garbled sounds, pitifully soft against the loud beating of her heart.

Roy.

She felt a swoop of something in her belly and she clutched her chest, trying to level her breathing.

*I found him. I found Roy!*

“Sannie, you okay?” Ivan asked, noticing her odd behavior.

Sannie breathed heavily, glancing at her surroundings for the first time. The room was quite lovely, with a small seating area on one side that opened up to the enormous windows that Roy was talking about.

*Roy! He’s actually ... here!* Sannie wanted to scream.

“Sannie, what’s goin’ on? You look weird.” Ivan asked with a frown.

“It’s nothing,” Sannie mumbled, stepping away from him. “I just need to use

the bathroom really quickly.”

She spun on her heel and marched toward the first door she could find—a mahogany door that stood on the right side of the room. On swinging the door open, Sannie realized that she was in one of the bedrooms of their small suite. Shutting the door behind her, Sannie leaned against the cool, soothing surface of the door, shutting her eyes. Her mind was reeling with shock, her heart trying to soar and squirm, all at once.

“Roy,” she whispered to herself, as though she were confessing a closely held secret. His name hadn’t left her lips in five years. Moisture brimmed in her eyes as she placed a palm against her mouth, afraid to burst into tears.

*I need to get out of these fancy clothes,* Sannie decided, throwing her hat down to the ground. She quickly unbuttoned the fitted jacket that held her chest a bit too tightly, making it hard to breathe. She tossed it away from her, inhaling deeply, savoring in the sensation of her torso freeing up.

“Sannie, what’s happening?” Ivan asked from outside. “Is that the bathroom?”

“No, it’s the bedroom, but there’s a bathroom in here, I think,” Sannie said weakly, eyeing the door she could see on the other end of their modest bedroom.

““Kay, get out quick, cause I need to go.”

“Yeah, yeah, give me a minute,” Sannie snapped back. She heard his footsteps retreating away from the door and took in a deep breath. Pulling her blouse forward, Sannie reached into the curves of her bosom to pull out a locket, given to her by an old friend.

The metal was cold in Sannie’s palm. Three roses of metal bloomed side by side, hanging by a long, thin chain. She stared at its undulating curves as her mind raced, trying to make sense of what had just occurred today.

When Sannie came to Little Rosa, she thought it would be a relatively easy job to do what she came to do. Things got a bit more complicated as she realized that telling people their future came with the baggage of enormous amounts of guilt and self-loathing. She used and abused the information she learnt from the stagecoach mail with ease, but some of the secrets she held made her feel sickened.

Then, half an hour ago, she met Roy.

Sannie chuckled loudly. *Fate sure has a wicked sense of humor. Roy's a sheriff? He follows and enforces laws? And how ridiculous is it that we should meet just when I'm ... trying to settle down with someone else? That he should be sheriff when I'm trying to pull one of my most important cons yet? How...* Sannie's thoughts trailed off as the sheer dearth of questions that she had become visible to her.

"Sannie, get out, I gotta whiz!" Ivan hollered from outside.

“Right, yeah!” Sannie said, getting away from the door to yank it open. Ivan was outside, skipping from one foot to the other with urgency.

“You took your bloody time,” he said as she brushed past her, eager to get to the bathroom.

“Sorry,” she replied, but he’d already gone in and shut the door behind him with a definitive thud.

Sannie looked around herself. The room she was in was smaller than the living room but it made the lakeside windows look bigger. The night was black outside. There was no moon.

She walked back to the living room to grab her things. She pulled out a few clothes that she could actually stand to wear—a pair of pants that she sewed herself and a loose, white shirt. She waited for Ivan to get out of the bathroom and then she went in and changed, relieved to finally be out of the

constricting clothes. Sannie walked out of the bathroom with her clothes bundled up in her hand and she saw Ivan sitting on the bed inside, sharpening his knife.

“Back to the pants, eh?” he asked her casually.

“You know me,” Sannie answered absentmindedly.

“I liked the skirt better,” he replied.

“It’s awful to walk in,” Sannie said as she folded and placed her clothes into a nearby bag. “Not to mention the skirt is too long and drags all over the bloody street.”

“So,” Ivan said, his eyes narrowing tensely. “What are we gonna do about that sheriff?”

Sannie paused. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you hear all his protecting my



people horseshit?” Ivan asked roughly. “That guy will figure out we’re bunko artists in less than a week. And when he does, he’s gonna be chasin’ us all the way to the jailhouse.”

“I think you may be overreacting a bit,” Sannie said seriously. “Even if he knows we’re bunko artists, that doesn’t mean he can arrest us. We’re not doing anything illegal. If the people believe what I’m saying and choose to pay me for that service, it’s on them. They’re not being coerced.”

“Hmm,” Ivan hummed, unsatisfied.

“Did you ask around about the diamonds?” Sannie asked, eager to change the subject. “Any news?”

“Yeah, there was, actually,” Ivan said, placing his knife on a table resting beside the bed. “There’s a woman that lives here named Matilda Best. She’s got the diamonds.”

“What?” Sannie asked him, surprised. “You got an actual name?”

“Yeah, and it was easy to find, too. Apparently, Matilda’s late husband used to get drunk in the local taverns and discuss the priceless diamonds passed down the family with basically anyone who’d listen. It’s popular lore in this town. Some people seem to think its fake and that there’s no diamonds while some are certain that there most definitely are diamonds and that Matilda Best is hiding them.”

“I know that name,” Sannie mumbled. “She had a letter addressed to her by her sister from Lawndale. Didn’t sounded like a very pleasant people on the first reading.”

“Some people think Best killed her husband,” Ivan added lightly.

Sannie raised a brow. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, he was this great cowboy and then one day he was trampled by his own horse.”

Sannie shrugged. “Stranger things have happened. Where does this woman live?”

“There’s a creek all the way across town. It holds all the fishin’ families of Little Rosa,” Ivan explained. “Matilda Best’s mansion—the largest in the tri county area, by the way—is at the part where the creek joins the river. Right at the end.”

“Okay, so we know who she is and we know where she lives. What next?” Sannie asked. “How can we ... go and meet her?”

“That’s the thing,” Ivan said with a frown. “Everyone describes Matilda as kind of a loner. She never comes into the city anymore cause she’s got about ten people to do everything for her and twenty more that would take their place at half the rate. It’s gonna be hard to get a hold of her unless you’re the bloody Sheriff.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Sannie said thoughtfully. “Word about my powers will

definitely reach the other side of town by tomorrow, if it hasn't already. A rich woman with a fortune at her disposal wouldn't let a soothsayer pass by without trying out their powers."

"You mean..."

"I mean that we need to start our soothsaying business, properly and spread the word of our powers," Sannie said clearly. "Women like her are bound to ask for a private reading in the comfort of their home and that will be our in."

"So we just wait until *she* notices *us*?"

"That's exactly right."



# Chapter Eight

## *An Easy Gig*

### ***Sannie***

Sannie and Ivan's first official day living in Little Rosa was spent socializing in the inn's diner over breakfast, and getting to know the staff. Tom III was a talkative man who loved his work deeply. Sannie appreciated his passion and enthusiasm, and listened to him describe his town and his inn for hours.

"Every night except Sunday our tavern gets a small band, too," he described excitedly, waving his fat hands. "It makes for some merry nights, you'll see."

"I'm sure," Sannie agreed, drinking in her surroundings with rising glee.

It had been too long since life had been this still and stable for Sannie. Only one afternoon in and she could feel her body

thriving under the comfort of a roof, and a well cooked, hearty meal. The money she'd made from the public reading was enough for them to afford the basic things they needed—and that was a novel experience in and of itself.

And most importantly, she'd found Roy.

The afternoon soon turned busy for Sannie. People who'd come to eat and drink at the tavern had heard of her talents. On seeing her, they began to approach her with kind smiles and friendly faces, asking for a reading. Sannie asked for their names before she picked one of them to start her job. While she'd charged three gold coins for every reading yesterday, she charged five gold coins per reading in the tavern. The tavern folk quietly agreed, waiting patiently on their seats for Sannie to call them. Tom made it so that Sannie's table was far from the rest of the restaurant, where people could speak to her in private.

Sannie and Ivan made about two hundred gold coins that day by selling various

amulets and potions alongside Sannie's mysterious abilities. Tom seemed absolutely thrilled with the traffic that Sannie was attracting to his restaurant. He hobbled along to her side that he was going to let her have free drinks here, so long as she conducted traffic to the tavern like this.

Sannie accepted, feeling overjoyed. *This is going great!* she thought, staring at the merry folk around her. *Why didn't I try doing this before?*

She slowly began to learn more about how to tell people their future. The art was not just in playing with what she already knew, but also with what they were telling her. A few times, she dared to make guesses that she had not read the letters, but that intuition told her would be right. She never got caught, or challenged; even if people thought she was wrong, they left quietly, mulling over what they'd heard.

When the day ended, Sannie was exhausted. Talking all day was tiring, to say the least, and trying when the person before



her was making life decisions based on what she was saying. When she shut the door of her room behind her, she sighed with relief, throwing down her hat.

“Wooh!” Ivan crowed as he faced her with glee. “Two hundred and twelve gold coins! This is enough for a whole week, Sannie!”

“Yeah, I know,” Sannie said with a smile. “This is better than I hoped—”

“Tell me about it!” Ivan was pacing excitedly. “At two hundred gold a day we don’t need to be in this sodding town for more than a few weeks to make a killing!”

Sannie took a step back. “I was thinking of it like we could stay here for a long time and ... have a really good life.”

“Come on, Sannie, you know what we’re here for,” Ivan said, rolling his eyes. “We’re here for the diamonds, that’s it. Once we get them, we’ll have to leave and go

someplace far away if we don't wanna be jailed for theft.”

“Yeah, I know...” Sannie trailed off unsurely. Roy’s brilliant blue eyes flashed in her mind, making her gut twist.

She felt Ivan’s fingers touch her chin as he pulled her face up to gaze into her eyes. “I know you really enjoy being ... you know, part of a normal crowd in a normal town. But it doesn’t have to be here, right? If we do things right here, we can go *anywhere*. Who knows, maybe even leave the country?”

“Right,” Sannie said, biting down on her bottom lip. “As long as we get off the road, I guess.”

A sudden knock on the front door interrupted their conversation. Sannie turned to grab a hold of the doorknob and pulled it open. One of the inn’s staff, Eugene, stood outside.

“Yes?” Sannie asked him.

“This was left for you by a messenger,” Eugene said, handing Sannie a rolled up piece of paper.

Sannie thanked Eugene and shut the door, eyeing the message curiously. The paper was stiff and the roll was secured with a small, expensive looking wax seal.

“What is that?” Ivan asked her warily.

“I don't know...” Sannie mumbled, gently peeling the wax seal off the paper. It rolled open and Sannie zoomed in on the words, reading them out loud.

“Dear Madame Cassandra,” she began, “I heard wonderful things about your soothsaying and apothecary services and I would like to cordially invite you over to my house tomorrow for tea. Please find the address written under my signature. Yours truly... *Matilda Best.*”

Sannie looked up at Ivan, her eyes

widening.

“Oh my God, you were right,” Ivan murmured. “She noticed us! And it only took one day!”

“Talk travels, I guess,” Sannie said, touching the edges of the letter gently.

“Well, we better get some sleep in if we wanna get on this tomorrow morning,” Ivan said, stretching his arms behind his back. “Maybe we can steal the diamonds and be oughta here by next week itself!”

Sannie felt her stomach drop at his statement but she said nothing. Two words rang in her mind over and over again as she pictured Roy’s crystal blue eyes.

*Not yet.*

\*\*\*

Sannie couldn't get to sleep.

It didn't happen often; she was usually so tired from a day of riding and running that she'd conk right out the moment her head touched a pillow. Things were different here, however. Her body wasn't tired and her mind was too excited and agitated about things to come. She tossed around in her bed, eyeing the darkened sky outside her window with rising anxiety.

Ivan had taken the bed that was outside while Sannie took the small private bedroom. She was glad for the privacy; Ivan was a snorer and it sometimes drove Sannie mad. She sighed as she tried to relax her head against her pillow, urging her heart to quiet down. *Come on. Sleep. You have so much to do tomorrow!*

A sudden *clack* sound to her right made Sannie jump. She rose on her elbow and stared at the unchanging room around her, her eyebrows rising on her forehead. *What was that?*

Another *clack* sound rang through her room and this time she caught it. Someone

was throwing *rocks* at her window.

Sannie pulled off her covers and hopped out of bed, throwing her coat around her shoulders. She gingerly tiptoed to her window, during which time another tiny pebble hit the glass pane of the window. She tucked her hair behind her ear as she peered down at the ground.

Roy was standing downstairs. She could see his shiny, dark hair clearly under the inn's lamps. He knelt down to the ground to pick another rock and then he looked up. On seeing Sannie in the window, he paused.

Sannie raised her arms in the air signaling, *What the hell are you doing?*

Roy waved downward. He was asking her to come down.

Sannie bit her lip and glanced behind her at the door that separated her and Ivan. He'd passed out hours ago, and she knew he was a sound sleeper. *I wasn't gonna get to sleep*

anyway.

She looked back down. Roy waved her down once more, giving her his heartbreakingly adorable, crooked grin. Sannie felt her heart skip a beat. She turned and hurried over to her bag to quickly put on her boots and her hat. She carefully crept out of her room, making sure that she didn't disturb Ivan out of his sleep. He was currently splayed across the bed, all four limbs hanging off of all four corners as he snored deeply. Sannie opened the front door slowly, inch by inch, praying that it wouldn't creek.

Once she'd slipped out of the room, Sannie took in a deep breath. *It would have been hard to explain to Ivan why I wanted to go meet the sheriff in the middle of the night.* She quickly sauntered downstairs, eager to see Roy without Ivan's baleful presence forcing her to act as though she didn't know him.

*I knew him,* she chanted to herself as she exited the main entrance of the inn. *He was my best friend.*

She took a left and began to jog toward the back of the inn. As she took a turn to the right, she saw Roy's tall figure standing underneath a tree, waiting for her with his hands in pockets. When he saw her, he straightened up pulling off his hat and holding it down on the side.

Sannie slowed to a halt a few paces away from him, stunned by his image. He'd grown bulkier in the past five years, and his old beard was gone, leaving his smooth, high cheekbones bare for everyone to admire. It almost hurt to look into his eyes—ice cold and fiery, all at once.

Suddenly, Roy charged toward her. The sudden movement startled Sannie but she felt no fear as Roy wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close into a hug, almost lifting her feet off of the ground.

Sannie hugged him back with abandon, moisture clouding her eyes and leaking out. She let the tears spill freely as she hugged her best friend, inhaling the scent of him that she'd been scared she'd one day forget.



*Not yet*, she thought as she inhaled deeply, stuffing her face into his neck.

Suddenly, Roy pulled away from her, clearing his throat. "I'm sorry," he said, shielding his eyes with his thick, dark fringe. "I just..." He sighed, heavily. "I'm really glad you're okay."

Sannie wiped a tear off her cheek hastily, trying to compose herself. "I'm really glad I'm okay, too," she joked.

Roy chuckled quietly, slipping his hands deep into his pockets. His forehead drew together in lines as he frowned, thinking about something that Sannie couldn't see.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"I just wanted to see you," he said plainly, leaning against a tree. "That Doctor August guy is really annoying to talk around."

“Of course he is. He doesn’t know anything about you,” Sannie replied, crossing her arms.

“You never spoke about me?” His question was murmured.

“No.”

“Sannie, I...” Roy’s words halted in the middle, as though something were stuck in his throat. “I don’t know where to start.”

Sannie blinked repeatedly, pulling in a deep breath to focus her mind. “So, you’re a sheriff now?” she asked congenially, her eyes on the ground. “You’re the one upholding the laws now, huh?”

“Yeah, I realized that the price for doing crime is too high,” he said simply.

Sannie’s gaze rose to his. “Did you now?”

“Yes, I did. I...” Roy pulled in a deep breath, as though he needed courage to say the next part. “I thought I lost you, Sannie.”

“You did lose me,” Sannie said with a matter-of-factness that shocked even her. “We’ve been apart for five years, Roy.”

“I know that,” Roy said with a hint of frustration in his voice. He paced back and forth before her a couple of times before turning back to face her. “Tell me—why are you here?”

Sannie frowned. “*You* called me downstairs.”

“No, I mean, why are you in Little Rosa?” he asked. “This couldn’t have been the best town for you guys to run your little scam. We’ve got quite a few book learning folk. Why come here?”

“What scam?” Sannie asked him, determined to perform her act of innocence.

“What are you talking about?”

“Sannie, come on, I know you can’t really see people’s future,” Roy said with a half-laugh. “I don’t know *how* you’re tricking them, but I know that you are.”

Sannie scowled. “How dare you accuse me of such a thing!”

“Come on, Sannie, I’ve seen you run bigger scams than this. It’s not a surprise—”

“And how do you know that I haven’t actually learnt how to do this stuff?” Roy snorted and Sannie pressed on. “No, seriously, Roy. Predicting the future is mostly about listening to what people are telling you about their own lives, carefully. You haven’t seen me in *five years*. How do you know I haven’t spent that time working on this?”

His deep blue eyes narrowed. “Philip didn’t tell you anything about having an uncle and you guessed it, somehow.”

“Philip who?”

“My deputy. He met you on your first day here.”

The blonde man whose uncle had passed came back to Sannie’s mind. “Yeah, well, I spent four hours before that chatting with other people from your town. People reveal stuff about other people all the time,” she retorted. *Roy cannot find out that I robbed stagecoaches.* “The *point* is that my business is legitimate and if people want to pay for it thinking that its actual fortune telling, that’s on them.”

Roy rolled his eyes. “Sannie, you can’t come into a town and start cheating people out of their money and expect no one to protest!”

“Oh, you’re one to talk!” Sannie was yelling now. “You were robbing people clean out of their cash not five years ago. You tried to convince *me* to rob a stagecoach! Or did you forget?”

Roy's crystal blue eyes blazed with a sudden wildfire. "Are you kidding me? I will *never* forget."

"You trying to rob that stagecoach is the only reason I'm here today, still in a life of crime," Sannie said bluntly. "You know, just because you found room in this world for yourself doesn't mean you get to judge me for trying to make a living. You're a sheriff now but you were once a thief, too."

"If you're asking me to turn a blind eye to your business, you're asking me to not do my job," Roy said simply.

"Oh, you don't have to turn a blind eye, Sheriff. Only you'll find that I'm not violating *any* laws and that the people that are happy with my services would be *very* angry if I were to be booted out of town."

His eyes seemed to soften with dull surprise. "Do you really think I'd send you away from me?"

“I don't know, Roy. It's been a long time since I knew you,” Sannie replied, more coolly than she felt on the inside. “Anyway, thanks for this lovely chat. It's been an awfully tiring day and I'm *weary*, Sheriff. I'll see ya around.”

With that, she spun on her heel, marching away from him with barely contained anger fueling her footsteps. Only, Sannie wasn't angry at Roy. She was angry at herself. Angry for falling backwards into a life of perpetual crime, angry that she'd descended into a career she despised—that of a cheater and a trickster. But most of all, Sannie was angry that the only person who ever truly loved her in spite of her vices had grown and improved beyond recognition. She was exactly the kind of scum Roy hunted and jailed, every day.

*People change*, she told herself as she hurried upstairs to her room, anxious to get into the comfort of her bed. *If Roy knew all that I'd done to survive in the last few years ... he'd hate me. Hell, he'd jail me.*

As Sannie crept back into her room, she glanced at Ivan's bed. He hadn't moved from his position. Sighing with relief, Sannie tiptoed past him into her bedroom, carefully shutting the door behind her.

She slipped out of her coat and walked over to her window to look at the spot where she'd met Roy. The street was deserted, except for one tall figure making his way over to the bank of the lake. She watched Roy's silhouette kneel down to the ground and pick up a bunch of pebbles. He began to throw them into the lake one by one, making the rocks skip across the water. Sannie watched him for almost half an hour before finally going back to bed.





# Chapter Nine

## *The Wealthy Widow*

**Sannie**

*Dear Matilda,*

*Harriet has been getting on my nerves lately. Your husband hasn't been dead one month and she won't stop talking about the will and the money left for her. She's Roger's sister but she doesn't seem to really care about him! No, it's all about the money. I hope Roger left her nothing. She's an old crone. I think she's been stealing china from my house but I can't quite prove it.*

*How are you holding up these days? I'm sorry I had to leave so soon after the funeral. Chaz and Bitsy are over and you know how my kids get when their cousins arrive. It's all hands on deck over here. I was wondering if you could send over a bit of money. Kevin has been drinking at the tavern almost every day now, so you know he's no help. Chaz keeps talking about you, wanting to stay over at Auntie Matilda's mansion. I miss you, too, and really want to come spend*

*some time with you. I know we haven't spoken much in the past, but now I want to be there for you. I know you're heavily grieving Roger's death. Perhaps if you ever had children of your own, it would be easier. I just can't imagine you stuck in that massive house all by yourself—*

“Sannie?”

Sannie looked up from the letter in her hand to see Ivan walking in, freshly bathed and dressed for the morning. “Coffee?” he asked her.

“Yes, please,” Sannie said, reaching for the pot of bubbling caffeine eagerly.

“Easy,” Ivan warned her as she hastily poured herself a cup.

Sannie was very sleep deprived from yesterday's late night rendezvous. Her fight with Roy had upset her and disturbed her

deeply, causing her to have a fitful sleep full of twisted dreams and firing guns. She woke up exhausted and craving more time in her bed, but she could have none today. They were supposed to meet Matilda Best today—the current known owner of Victoria’s Diamonds. Meeting and impressing her was key to their plan of stealing the diamonds. They wouldn’t be able to get anywhere near them without gaining access to Matilda’s house.

Sannie and Ivan had a hurried breakfast at the inn’s tavern while Sannie memorized all the details from the letters addressed to Matilda. She seemed to be a reclusive woman, with greedy relatives that pined for her gold shamelessly. Sannie’s eyes scanned every inch of the letters for any detail she missed that she could use at the reading.

“You look tired,” Ivan commented over his spoonful of scrambled eggs.

“Yeah, I couldn’t get to sleep right,” Sannie said, exhausted. “I might be too tired to ride.”

“I can call us a cart if you want,” Ivan replied. “There’s plenty that go around the city, pickin’ and droppin’ folks off.”

“All right,” Sannie said, feeling slightly encouraged. “That sounds good.”

They reached the Best mansion early that afternoon, bobbing along in a horse cart that Tom called for them. Sannie marveled at the scenery she saw near the mansion—from one side, the creek wove its way through the prairie like a slithering, watery snake, and then it suddenly joined a boisterous, gurgling river that stretched for miles across, cutting through the rolling planes with its turgid waters.

“This place is beautiful,” Sannie breathed as she hopped off the cart, drinking in the feeling of the soft, wavy grass tickling the skin on her ankles. *Damnit, I should have ridden Lady here. She would have absolutely loved it.*

“You think that’s beautiful?” she heard Ivan say. “Turn around.”

Sannie spun on her heel and came face to face with the largest, most ornate mansion she had ever seen. The house was decidedly Victorian, with three distinct turrets rising from its stocky base. The entirety of the house was painted in white and black, giving it a luxe, regal elegance that wasn’t visible in the other houses of the city. Sannie slowly waddled into the mansion’s expansive front yard, admiring its manicured shrubbery and painstakingly grown flowers.

“Are you seein’ this house?” Ivan asked from behind her. Sannie turned to see his grey eyes scanning the shape of the mansion with naked greed bubbling in his voice.

“It’s ... unbelievable,” Sannie breathed. “Can you imagine what it would be like to be *this* rich?”

“I say we find out,” Ivan said, his eyes trained on the elaborate house. “Come on, let’s

go in. We don't wanna keep this woman waiting.”

Sannie nodded, walking toward the front door of the house with slow, but sure steps. Tall, ivory pillars greeted her on the way to the massive, blackwood doorway. A gold, round knocker hung on the door with a coiling serpent carved onto its body. Sannie reached forward and knocked on the door twice, stepping back to stand beside Ivan. A few seconds later, the door swung open, revealing a tall, somber-looking man dressed in a finely pressed suit and coat.

“Hello,” Sannie said to the man with a congenial smile. “I’m Madame Cassandra and this is Doctor August. We’re here to meet with Matilda Best.”

“Ah, yes,” the man said with a nod. “Miss Best has been expecting you both. My name is Andrew and I am Miss Best’s butler. Please, come in.”

*A butler, holy cow, Sannie thought to*

herself as she entered the mansion. The interior of the mansion was even more extravagant than the outside. An enormous chandelier hung from the ceiling in the foyer, throwing glittering amber hues of light all around the room. The floor of the house was covered in the softest carpet Sannie had ever laid her feet on—she felt a wild urge to kick off her shoes and feel the carpet with her bare toes.

“I’ll go and fetch Miss Best,” the butler said with a polite smile. “Please, seat yourself in the living area.”

He pointed Sannie and Ivan into the direction of an entryway that was on the left hand side of the foyer. On walking through it, Sannie was greeted by the Bests’ opulent living room. All the furniture and drapes were made of expensive velvet and the intricate, stained glass of the windows threw colorful lights onto the hardwood floors. The carpet was different here but equally lush—Sannie dug her soles into it, savoring the comfort.

“Can you believe this place?” Sannie



asked Ivan in a hushed whisper.

“This has got to be the finest house I’ve ever seen in Texas,” Ivan said loudly, gazing around him with awe etched on his handsome face.

“Why, thank you,” a voice said from behind them, causing them both to turn to the living room’s entrance. An old woman stood under the entryway’s gleaming lights. She was perhaps a head shorter than Sannie, with curly grey hair pinned to one side meticulously. Her wrinkles were deep, but her beady, black eyes were bright with energy and curiosity. The woman hobbled forward, holding her rich, turquoise skirt up in her hands with an elegance that betrayed years of training on how to appear poised. Sannie corrected her posture instinctively, sitting up straighter in her seat.

“I had this entire place renovated, you know,” she croaked as she approached them. “Cost me a fortune but it was worth it.”

“Certainly,” Ivan said agreeably, moving forward to shake her hand. “It’s really good to meet you, ma’am. I’m Doctor August.”

The widow’s beady little eyes widened considerably. “*You’re* Doctor August?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well.” Matilda let out a small chuckle as she shook Ivan’s hand. “I didn’t imagine that an apothecary could be quite so ... *dashing*.”

Sannie raised her eyebrows with mild amusement, just barely holding her tongue.

“Oh, thank you,” Ivan said, flashing the widow a brilliant grin. “I must admit the apothecary does help me stay healthier than most.”

“I’ll say,” Matilda purred, watching Ivan with nothing short of pure lust in her eyes.

“This is the Madame Cassandra,” Ivan said, waving a palm toward Sannie.

The widow’s eyes moved toward her and narrowed. “Welcome, soothsayer,” she said in a grave tone, looking Sannie up and down pointedly. “I’ve been waiting to meet you.”

“Hello, ma’am,” Sannie said, moving forward to shake her hand.

The widow ignored her, choosing to hobble over to the couch and find herself a comfy seat.

Sannie glanced at Ivan for a bit before refocusing on Matilda. “I’m so glad you’re trying out our services. They’ve been very beneficial to others in your town.”

“So they’ve said,” the widow replied in an even, careful tone. “People have been telling me the most fascinating tales about you. Tales of how you knew of their parents’

names before they ever told you. How you guessed their birthdays, their pets, their future career goals.”

“I’m good at my craft.” Sannie shrugged.

“And how exactly do you do this ... *craft* of yours?” There was slight sneer in the widow’s voice that Sannie ignored.

“Well, I can read your palm, or we could use cards or I can give you—”

“Here, then,” the widow interrupted rudely, shoving her palm under Sannie’s nose. Sannie jumped, feeling a bit taken aback. “Read it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Here’s my palm. Tell me my future,” Matilda commanded.

“Just like that?” Sannie asked unsurely.

“I think we ought to discuss a reading price first, ma’am—”

“Consider it an audition,” she replied with a taunting grin on her aged face. “Trust me, dearie, if you pass the audition, there’s no price you can name that *my* estate cannot match.”

Sannie stared at the widow’s rigid expression with a level gaze. “All right, then. I’ll read your palm.” She reached forward to take Matilda’s wrinkly palm in her hands. Her skin was loose and mushy, and the back of her palm was incredibly freckled. Sannie pretended to peer at the lines on her hand carefully, as though she could read some secret words hidden in the folds of her skin. She could feel the widow’s eyes trained on her, watching her every expression.

“You just suffered a great loss,” Sannie began, deciding to start easy. “Your husband.”

The widow’s eye twitched. “Easy guess. Anyone outside the local bars could have told

you that the richest man in town just died.”

“You also have a sibling,” Sannie continued. “A sister, correct?”

“Correct,” Matilda mumbled.

“I see a fight ahead in your future. A contested will, people fighting over who gets what from your husband’s remaining estate.”

“What else?” Matilda demanded with narrowed eyes.

“Your sister is married, yes? Yes, she is. And she doesn’t live here in town,” Sannie said as she tilted Matilda’s palm. “She wants your money, too. You can expect a communication in your future where all these people need your money. Oh, your sister has children, too, I see. You, however, have none.”

“That’s enough,” the widow said, pulling her hand away. She took in several, shallow breaths, staring at her palm with mild

confusion for a few seconds before glancing at Sannie with a guarded expression.

“Are you a witch?” she asked suddenly.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, are you practicing witchcraft?” Matilda demanded, her wrinkled face scowling deeply. “I can’t use your services if you’re practicing witchcraft. I’m a good, Christian woman.”

“I guarantee you, 100 percent, that my practice is entirely godly in nature,” Sannie assured her. “I’m a good woman, Madame, who’s just searching for a new town to make my home.

“And how can I be sure that you’re not lying to me?” Matilda asked, crossing her arms against her chest.

“Mrs. Best—” Ivan began.

“That’s *Miss* Best, Doctor,” she corrected him sweetly, fluttering her ancient eyelashes at him.

“*Miss* Best,” Ivan amended with a smooth, charming grin, “I can personally vouch for Sannie’s work. I’ve watched her do it for years and her abilities are truly a gift from God.”

Matilda glanced at Sannie suspiciously. “You *are* Christian, yes?”

“Uh, yes, very much so,” Sannie replied. “Devoutly.”

“As one should be,” Matilda mumbled, nodding slowly. “Have you consulted with a priest about your abilities? What did he say?”

Sannie glanced at Ivan and back. “Uh, yes, I asked a reverend back home about it and he, uh, gave me his blessings.”

“Reverend Lowell loved you, Sannie,”



Ivan interjected with a smarmy grin. “She’s always so modest. Reverend Lowell was thrilled by the grace God has bestowed upon her. Her gift is a gift for all of us, after all! It’s on his word that we decided to venture down south and spread the joy of her work.”

“Wow, that’s wonderful,” Matilda coed, staring at Ivan with googly eyes.

*The old bird’s really crushing on him,* Sannie noted.

“Trust me, Matilda,” Ivan said, placing a hand on hers. The widow gasped a little. “You can’t go wrong with our services. We can help you heal and plan your future. It’s God’s gift to you that we got washed into Little Rosa with the storm and not somewhere else. Let us *help* you.”

Matilda took in a deep breath, giving Ivan a hesitant, fluttering smile. “All right, yes. I’d like to hire you both.”

“Excellent!” Ivan said with a clap,

giving the widow a wide, charming grin.

“Well,” Matilda said to Ivan, “I’d like for you to come to my house once every few days and administer to me the potions that I will be needing. If I need a soothsaying session, I will let you know and you can bring Madame Cassandra along with you the next day. How does that sound?”

“That sounds good,” Ivan replied. “Although, I must say that having us on call will not be a cheap service to purchase.”

“Money’s no object,” she stated confidently. “Name your price.”

“One thousand gold coins for every day that I come here,” Ivan offered. “Two thousand if Cassandra joins me.”

“Done,” the widow replied immediately, making Sannie pull back a little in shock. *Is she serious?*

“Of course, I’ll need detailed predictions of the future, not just vague declarations that I cannot make use of,” the widow clarified, giving Sannie a strict look. “If I feel like your services aren’t up to the price, I will let it be known.”

“We wouldn’t have it any other way,” Ivan said, moving forward to shake her hand. Matilda pressed her palm against his and shook it with a satisfied smile.

“We have a deal, then,” she said.

“Deal,” Ivan concurred, giving her a warmer smile than any Sannie had ever seen before.

The widow was tired then and wished to retire for the day. She asked Ivan to bring Sannie along for a soothsaying session tomorrow, billed at two thousand gold coins for the day. Sannie was positively skipping as she strolled out of the Bests’ stately gardens.

“Two thousand gold coins,” Sannie

hissed to Ivan once they were out of earshot of everyone. “For a *day!*”

“Your fortune telling is a bloody steal!” Ivan said excitedly, waving down an approaching horse cart.

“I don't think it's that. I think she hated me,” Sannie said honestly. “Or did you not notice?”

Ivan jutted out his bottom lip. “Yeah, she didn't seem too fond of you.”

“Probably because she was overly fond of *you*,” Sannie said with a sideways glance. “She was practically falling in love with you right then and there.”

Ivan barked out a laugh. “Yeah, yeah I noticed that. My smile is how I con half the women folk I've ever played.”

“And boy, oh boy, was she Christian,” Sannie said, letting out a low whistle.

“Yeah, why did you look so stunned when she asked you about your faith?” Ivan asked. “I’ve seen you come up with lies quicker than that.”

“Well, I never had parents that could teach me religion or take me to church. I don't really, uh, know any of that stuff.” Sannie scratched her chin. “I should probably learn.”

“Yeah, it might be a good idea for us to show our faces during Sunday Mass,” Ivan said with a shrug. His grey eyes were flat. “You know, socialize. Might help people believe our work is godly, or whatever.”

Sannie nodded in agreement. “Yeah, let’s do that. Anyway, even if she hated me, she’s given us access to the house,” she said as the horse cart stopped before them. She bunched up her skirt in her fist and hoisted herself up onto the cart. “That’s what we wanted, right?”

“Yes, that was it,” Ivan said, joining her

side. The cart driver slowly began to lead the horse away from the mansion, toward the inner city. “Pretty soon we’ll have our hands on what we need and we won’t have to put up our charade here for much longer.”

“Right, yeah,” Sannie said, turning her eyes to the river before her. It was beautiful and shimmery in the sun’s reddening, evening glow. Sannie inhaled deeply, enjoying the waft of cool, fresh air as it passed by her.



# Chapter Ten

*Witch*

***Roy***

The sun rose high in Little Rosa's afternoon sky, as Roy hurriedly wrapped up his work at the jailhouse, eager to be free. He reviewed all of his reports faster than he ever had before, and browsed through them without taking a single break in between. He wanted to take off early and go see Sannie. His fight with her last night haunted him deeply. Her words rang in his mind over and over again, making his gut twist with guilt.

*You trying to rob that stagecoach is the only reason I'm here, today, still in a life of crime.*

Roy slammed a file shut, trying to quell the upset motion of his innards.

“You okay, Boss?” he heard Philip ask



from his desk, concerned.

“Yes, yes,” Roy mumbled, moving onto the next report.

“You seem to be in a right rush,” Philip noted.

“I’ve got a few, uh, errands to run,” Roy replied hastily. “Very important, non-negotiable.”

“What kind of errands? You want some help?”

“Nah, that’s okay,” Roy replied with a grateful smile. “You tell me. Did you find out if your uncle’s okay?”

Philip sighed heavily. “I don’t know—he was supposed to write to me, but I haven’t received anything in a while now... I’m gettin’ kinda nervous, Chief.”

“I can understand that,” Roy said,

looking him directly in the eyes. “But remember what I said, right? There’s literally no way she could make that prediction. She’s probably counting on it to take a while before you realize she’s wrong.”

“Unless she’s a witch,” Philip mumbled, jutting his chin in and out. “And has all those, you know, *witchy* powers.”

“She’s *not* a witch,” Roy corrected him, signing his name under a report. “There are no such things as witches.”

“Say, do you know this woman or something?” Philip asked him.

Roy looked up from his desk for only a second before looking back down. “No, I don’t,” he replied plainly. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know, something about yer face when you saw her at the public readin’,” Philip said, shrugging. “Just got this feelin’ from yer face that you knew her. Eh, maybe I was just seein’ things.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Roy said, as he signed underneath the final report. He shut the last file with satisfaction, glancing at the clock. “Well, these are all done. Make sure Bradley gets these, all right? I’m gonna head out now. I’ll probably be back in a few hours. If something comes up, leave a message on my desk and I’ll take a look at it later.”

“Alrighty, Boss!” Philip said and wave as Roy made his way toward the door of the jailhouse. “See ya later, then!”

“Is the county horse in the stable?” Roy asked.

“Yeah, she’s in there,” he replied. “‘Bout time you get your own beast, eh?”

“Maybe, someday,” Roy replied, shutting the door behind him.

Throwing his coat around his shoulders and pulling down his hat, he made his way toward the county stable. Only two horses

were in there—the county mare and Philip’s gelding, Parakeet. As Roy passed Parakeet, the horse began to whinny, turning his large head away from him.

“Don’t worry, Parakeet, I’m not taking you away from Phil,” Roy mumbled as he crossed the stables toward the mare. She looked up at him with large, dark brown eyes.

“You’re new,” Roy noted as he neared her, taking care to do it slowly. She watched him perfectly calmly as he approached her, tapping her feet on the ground once or twice. Her dark brown hide was smooth and shiny, with chocolate-colored hair flowing down her back. She leaned in with her head and pressed her face against Roy, catching him by surprise.

*She’s a calm one,* Roy noted as he patted her neck. He saddled the mare and mounted her, guiding her out into the daylight. The mare followed his instructions easily, trotting ahead according to the touch of his hand. Roy guided her toward Tom’s Inn, his mind churning. *I’m gonna apologize to Sannie,* he decided. *I’m gonna say I’m sorry. She’s right; she*

*hasn't broken any laws and I have no business telling her not to do this.*

Roy couldn't feel at rest with the idea of Sannie and his last conversation being a fight. He'd found her again after so long; no fight was worth keeping himself away from her.

Tom's Inn arrived in his view soon, standing tall amongst the rolling fields of Little Rosa. Roy trotted over to the inn's entrance, taking a right to reach the stables. Suddenly, his eyes caught the light off of a very familiar shade of light brown hair. Roy spotted Sannie trotting along on a jet black horse, leaving dust behind her.

"Sannie!" Roy yelled, urging his mare to trot after her.

Sannie's black horse stopped in its path as she pulled at its reigns, turning to face the sound of his voice. Locks of mahogany billowed across her beautiful face as she stared back at Roy with her lush lips slightly parted. Roy rode up to her side, pulling himself to his

full height.

“Hey there,” Sannie said to him with a meaningful look. Roy smiled back at her.

“Hey,” he replied in a gruff voice. “Where are you headed?”

“Nowhere. I just wanted to take Lady out for a ride,” she said, stroking the neck of her horse lovingly. “Fancy a race?” she asked him casually, tucking a strand of silken brown hair behind her ear.

“What?” Roy asked, mildly surprised.

“A race, from here to the other side of the lake,” she offered with a small, cocky smile, jutting her chin in the direction of the vast expanse of water to their right. “Loser buys dinner.”

“Hmm, that’s about three miles, eh?” Roy asked with a grin, eyeing her from under the brim of his hat. “Alrighty, then.”

“Ready?” Her eyes sparkled under the sun’s afternoon rays. Roy felt his heart skip a beat as he admired her glowing form. “Go!”

Sannie leaned down on her horse and kicked into motion immediately. Her speed and agility shocked Roy for an instant. Before he could blink, she was already riding away from him.

*Holy smokes, she’s fast!* Roy cursed, leaning down on his mare as he nudged her to run after them. The mare understood him with surprising ease, breaking into a sprint behind Sannie’s pitch-black horse. Roy felt the stupendous power of his horse in the motion of her strong, muscular limbs as they flexed underneath him. He felt as though the mare could sense the excitement of the sudden race. She leaned into Roy’s command willingly, thundering after Sannie’s fast moving figure with wild abandon.

Sannie was still a ways away, her horse running somehow even faster than Roy’s excited mare. Roy held onto the reins as tight

as he could as he nudged the horse to go faster. The county mare tore through the gorgeous green grasslands, speeding by the crystal blue blur of the lake's horizon blending with the cloudy skies above. Wind whipped around Roy mercilessly, causing his hat to flop off his head and fly backwards and away. He looked back for only a second before looking ahead again—he was slowly gaining on Sannie. She was near now, a picture of focused precision as she and her horse worked as one machine, flying across the terrain with effortless grace.

Roy could feel his mare straining harder. “You’re a competitive one, eh? Good girl,” he murmured into the horse’s ear, as he held on. The sound of his voice seemed to spur her on and she somehow pushed even harder, falling right behind Sannie’s beast. The lake’s icy blue waters had begun to curve away from them. They were near the finish line.

Sannie’s horse curved right, leaning sideways in a manner that belayed extraordinary amounts of practice. Roy’s mare couldn’t hope to match that maneuver—she fell a few paces behind Sannie’s horse as the



turn slowed her down. Sannie's long brown locks whipped in the wind behind her, making her look like a princess on the run. She tore through the end of the lake with ease, letting out a loud, "Whooo!"

Roy laughed at her, pulling back on the reins of his mare. Sannie took a few more seconds to slow down and make a turn back toward him.

"I win!" she crowed gayly, throwing her fist in the air, her mahogany curls bouncing behind her. Her horse neighed happily, raising its muzzle into the air. "You owe me dinner!" Sannie informed him, patting her horse to settle it down.

"A well-deserved win," Roy said, dismounting his mare carefully. He glanced at his mare's rather droopy eyes and her shallow breathing. *She looks tired*, he thought, instinctively placing a hand on her neck to comfort her.

"She needs water," Sannie said, trotting

closer to him. "So does Lady."

"They can drink at the lake," Roy said, pointing at the body of water they'd just crossed.

"Is that a still water lake?" Sannie asked. Roy nodded. "Yeah, there is no way," she replied, flipping her hair back. "Drinking from still water lakes can kill horses, you know."

"Really? Well..." Roy scratched his chin. "Would a river do?"

"Moving, fresh water?" Her eyes brightened. "Yes! But where are we gonna find a river?"

"Come with me," Roy said with a smile, walking ahead with his mare's reins in his hands.

Sannie gave him a bemused look, following after him with her skirt bunched up

in her hand.

“You did so well,” Roy murmured to his mare. She let out a soft snort in his direction, causing him to chuckle.

“She’s beautiful, Roy,” Sannie commented, her eyes trained on the ground. “She yours?”

“No, she’s a county mare. She’s new. She’s actually...” Roy snorted, “*different* from the horses we’ve been sent before.”

“Hmm,” Sannie noted with a knowing smile. “She seems to like you.”

Roy felt the mare nudge the back of his head with her muzzle, and he chuckled. “You know, I kind of like her, too.”

“Where are we going anyway?” Sannie asked, staring around her in apparent confusion. “I don’t see any river.”

“Yeah, but if you listen, you might be able to hear it,” Roy said slyly, leading them toward a hill on the other side of the lake. “It’s just beyond that hill.”

Sannie closed her eyes for a few seconds. Roy used the moment to admire the curve of her cheeks, the rosy pink of her lips. A slight smile graced her delicate face. “I think I hear it,” she whispered softly. “Lady smells the water, too, see?” The jet black horse’s nose was twitching as she slowly moved closer to the crest of the hill.

Roy’s mare began to trot faster as well, encouraged by the moisture she could sense in the air. Roy and Sannie climbed the hill alongside the two beasts in trusted silence, admiring the quiet beauty of the prairie landscape. When he finally reached the crest, Roy stretched up, gleefully drinking in the view before him.

The hill they were standing on sloped down to the banks of the river that curled its silver entrails across the grassy land. Cool evening wind billowed past Roy, rustling

through his clothes with its icy touch. The sky had begun to reveal shades of dusky orange, and flirty purple, throwing these colors onto the reflective surface of the water.

“Oh my *God*,” Sannie gasped as she joined Roy’s side by the hilltop. “This is beautiful!”

“I know,” Roy said in satisfied agreement.

Sannie placed a foot on Lady’s stirrup and hoisted herself upon her saddle’s seat. “Come on, let’s get down to the bank! Lady needs a drink!”

Roy chuckled at her enthusiasm, mounting his mare eagerly. They both trotted down the hill, riding along the paths that had been carved for horses by the people of Little Rosa. The trip down was enchanting, the iridescent blue of the river was a sight one could not easily look away from. Roy watched Sannie’s expression furtively as she travelled beside him. The joy evident on her face made

something in his stomach swoop.

They reached the bank of the river soon and dismounted their horses, letting them saunter to the water and begin taking long draughts out of it. Sannie skipped along the edge of the water, kneeling down to dip her fingers into its gentle flow.

“This town...” She trailed off as she gazed around herself in awe. “It’s just stunning.”

“It’s really quite something, isn’t it?”

“I could stay here forever,” she breathed, staring at the scenery, mesmerized.

Roy cleared his throat, turning his eyes away from her to the river. “Hey, I, uh, I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Sannie’s large eyes turned to him curiously. “You are?”

“Yeah, about last night. The fight we had?” Roy began, running a hand through his messy hair. “I was wrong to tell you what to do with your work. It’s not illegal in any way, so who cares.”

Sannie swung her thick brown hair forward so her face was hidden behind. Roy frowned. *She never used to do that that before.*

“I appreciate you saying that,” she said, her fingers fiddling with a blade of bright green grass. She refused to look up at him. With a sigh, Roy turned back to the gorgeous scenery before them.

“When did you get a horse?” Roy asked her conversationally, eyeing her beast’s lustrous black mane dancing in the wind as she played around with the county mare.

“‘Bout five years ago,” Sannie said with a soft smile. “Her name’s Lady. She was a gift. Just a filly when I got her.”

Roy blinked rapidly. They’d gotten

separated five years ago as well; she must have gotten this gift soon after that incident. *I wonder who she met that gifted her a bloody horse.*

“What’s her name?” Sannie asked, jerking her chin toward the county mare. The dark brown horse glistened in the sunset light as she bounded after Lady, hopping around excitedly. The horses splashed their feet in the river water, throwing sparkling droplets all around them.

“I don't think she has one,” Roy replied with narrowed eyes. “She’s just a county mare. She’s smarter than the other horses they send us, though. It’s almost like she can read my thoughts. As if she’s—”

“A witch?” Sannie asked with a grim smile.

Roy chuckled heartily. “Yeah, a witch.”

“Witch is a pretty good name for a horse, you know?” Sannie said, giving him a



sideways glance.

“You know what? You’re right,” Roy said with a smile, gazing at the two mares. “Witch. That’s what I’m gonna call her.”

“Some of your townsfolk might have a problem with that,” Sannie commented with a raised brow.

“Yeah, about that,” Roy said with a raised finger. “Whatever it is you’re doing to guess people’s future, you have to be less good at it. If people begin to suspect you’re a witch, they’re gonna give you the boot.”

“All right, August and I were worried about the same thing,” Sannie said with a sigh. “We’re planning to show up to Sunday Mass, you know, show people that I can cross the threshold of a church without burning up.”

“Sandra Carson in a church, praying,” Roy snorted. “Boy, I’d like to see that.”

“Give it to me straight, how boring is it gonna be?”

“Oh, you’re gonna wanna kill yourself,” he replied confidently. “Reverent Psalm had a burning passion for the Holy Bible and *singing*.”

“Excellent,” Sannie whistled, leaning back with a frown. “I don't know who’s gonna hate that more, me or Iv— Doctor August.”

“Come on, Sannie, I know that’s not his real name,” Roy said with a roll of his eyes.

“I don't know what you are talking about,” she parroted with a polite smile.

“So, you and the doctor, are you guys...” Roy raised an eyebrow.

“What? No!” Sannie exclaimed with a wave of her hand. “No, we ... we care about each other but it’s nothing more than that. We’ve travelled together for a while now. That

makes a bond, you know?”

Roy gazed at her form, lying on the grass beside him and felt something in his stomach stir. The fact that Sannie was actually here hadn't quite sunk in yet. He felt the beat of his heart rise as difficult questions danced around his lips. *Just ask her*, Roy told himself, eyeing her lustrous, brown mane.

“I have to ask,” Roy began, remembering flashes of the way they'd separated. The sound of the bullet. The feeling of something striking his head, turning his world to blackness. “What happened to you, Sannie? After we got separated? What did you ... do?”

Sannie looked up at the slowly darkening skies, her lips pressing together tightly. “I don't want to speak about that, Roy. Not yet.” Her rosy lashes fluttered as she looked up at him with a hint of nervousness in her eyes.

“That's okay,” Roy murmured,

stomping on his own curiosity. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you.” Her reply was soft.

“Perhaps I could come by the tavern at the inn sometimes,” Roy offered with a shrug. “You could tell me my future.”

Sannie laughed lightly. “I don't know your future, Roy. But I do like the idea of you coming by sometimes.”

“You do?” Roy asked hopefully.

“Yeah, I really do,” she said with a kind smile, a few strands of warm brown hair billowing across her beautiful face. “Maybe we could play cards.”

Roy laughed out loud. “A cheater’s grudge match?”

“Absolutely.”

They chatted for about another half an hour. Roy told Sannie about how he was studying law on his own, with books that he'd purchased for himself. He told her about his job as the Sheriff, and the kind people that lived in his town. Sannie never responded with any old anecdotes of her own. Roy noticed it, but he didn't prod her.

When dusk had finally settled over Little Rosa and the river had turned into a black serpent made of twinkling moonlight, Roy and Sannie turned back toward the inn on their horses. The beasts had thoroughly enjoyed themselves at the bank playing with each other and they raced across the length of the lake together. This time, Sannie's Lady slowed down a bit so she ran alongside the county mare.

*Witch*, Roy reminded himself as he placed a hand against the mare's warm, muscular neck.

Roy dropped Sannie off at the entrance of Tom's Inn. She gave him a coy smile as she left, making him promise to come by and visit

the tavern the next day. Roy agreed to the promise gladly; he wanted to spend time with her more than anything. From the corner of the inn's windows, Roy could see Doctor August's blonde head popping in and out to glare at them.

“Your doctor's gettin' jealous,” Roy said to Sannie with a cocky grin.

“Shut up!” Sannie snapped jokingly as she rode her horse into the inn's stables. Roy laughed as she waved him goodbye, disappearing behind the stable doors.

*That went better,* Roy thought to himself as he turned Witch into the direction of the jailhouse. He nudged her reins ever so gently, but it was enough for the mare to hear him. She began to trot along the wide country road, swishing her chocolate brown tail behind her. Roy replayed his meeting with Sannie over and over in his mind as he rode to the jailhouse, trying to burn the image of her on the grassy wild hill into his mind.

\*\*\*

Roy and Sannie began to meet almost every day, thrilled to once again be in each other's company. Roy would wrap up his daily duties and rush over to Tom's Inn for lunch, pulling Witch along with him. He would play cards with Sannie, share hot, delicious food and take their horses for a ride to the river.

Roy enjoyed her company deeply, thrilled to see her healthy and with laughter etched on her stunning face. He noticed how Sannie had grown more rigid in the past five years. Her tone was harder, her shoulders perpetually tense. She would often have a dark, quiet look gloss over her eyes—something Roy had never seen her do before. He wondered what she was thinking about, but he never dared to ask her. He was too afraid of what her answer might be.

*What if she suffered greatly after we got separated? He worried inwardly. How could I bear to hear that, if she can't bear to tell me?*

Sannie would brighten up quickly, however, ever ready to act like the perfect lady for the townsfolk that came to speak with

her. Watching her work again was amazing to Roy; her skill had only increased since he last knew her.

“So, tell me why you’re here, Hannah,” Sannie said smoothly, batting her large eyes at the customer before her. They were seated in the tavern of Tom’s Inn, in the special booth reserved for Sannie’s customers. Dusk was still a few hours away and the inn was swimming with folks returning from the ranches.

“Madame Cassandra,” Hannah Keaton, the local milkmaid’s daughter began in a mope voice. “I wanted to ask what you see in the future of my marriage.”

“Why are you concerned about your marriage?” Sannie asked with a frown.

“Well, my husband... He’s kind of a drunk,” she said softly, with a reserved shrug. “He’s rude and rowdy and I... I’m not bein’ fair here, because he’s plenty stressed out these days. And I know that he loves me, he says it after every fight—”



“All right, relax,” Sannie interrupted, placing a palm on Hannah’s comfortingly. “You don’t have to say any more.”

“Thank you, madame,” Hannah said with a relieved sigh, clutching her chest. “Please, I just need to know what my future holds. Help me.”

Sannie gave her a kind but unsure smile. Roy narrowed his eyes at Sannie, very keen on figuring out how she ran this con.

“Give me your palm,” Sannie said to Hannah. The woman turned her hand over eagerly, her eyes bouncing between her skin and Sannie’s face. Sannie leaned in and gazed at the lines on the woman’s hand with an air of polished expertise, pursing her lips here and there as though something was occurring to her.

*What an actress,* Roy marveled quietly, taking a sip of his coffee.

“I see you have a close relative. A brother?” Sannie asked.

Hannah gasped, nodding fervently. Roy shook his head, mired by confusion. *How did she guess that?*

“I see you with your brother, away from here,” Sannie said. “I see you leaving Little Rosa, forever.”

Hannah’s eyes had welled up with silent tears that hovered at the edges of her lashes. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes. I don't know when it will happen, but it will happen for sure,” Sannie said in a smooth, confident tone, gazing back into Hannah’s stare unabashedly. The woman sighed, a single teardrop leaking down the side of her cheeks.

“In my heart I knew it would come to that, I knew it a long time ago...” Hannah sniffed, reaching for Sannie’s hand, and holding it firmly. “But I was waiting for

something, some sign or, I don't know—”

“You were afraid,” Sannie said earnestly. “You were afraid of what is to come next. That’s perfectly normal.”

“I was,” Hannah’s shaky voice had begun to strengthen. “But now I know what I have to do. Thank you, Madame Cassandra, thank you!”

Roy watched the woman in awe. Hannah fumbled over with gratitude, pulling out the ten gold coins Sannie charged for a session without a moment of doubt. She thanked Sannie profusely, bowing slightly with respect. Sannie spoke with her softly for a few more minutes, parting words of confidence and comfort.

*She doesn’t just predict their future, Roy realized as he watched her from his seat. She actually talks to them. Of course they love her.*

And it was true—the people of Little Rosa loved Sannie. Her presence had filled the

community with an unexpected bout of vigor and her charm entrapped even the harshest of her critics. Her uncanny predictions made people revere her, whilst her caring attention and sage advice made them rely on her.

Tom III in particular was jovial about Sannie's addition, as his tavern had never been so packed before. Over the last week, he'd added new meals to his menu and hired more staff because the crowd had multiplied beyond the control of his old team. He was enormously happy with the arrangements, his fat face pink with glee as he sent complimentary glasses of champagne to Sannie's table.

"For the lady and the sheriff," Tom said sweetly, placing the drinks on the table himself. Roy understood the significance of that move; Tom never served anyone himself. "This gal's mintin' money for me, Chief."

"She is exceptional at her job," Roy said smartly.

“The people here are just lovely,” Sannie said with a wide smile on her glowing face. “Honestly, I haven’t enjoyed myself quite as much in any other town.”

“I can’t imagine anyone not lovin’ your pretty face!” Tom said with a chuckle, patting his rotund belly. “Your doctor there is a crabby one, though.”

Roy’s eyes followed the motion of the innkeeper’s hand. Doctor August sat by the bar of the tavern, drinking his beer in cold silence. His jaw was strapped into hard, tight lines and he threw furtive glances across the tavern to Roy and Sannie.

*He’s never too happy to see me,* Roy noted as he leaned back into his seat beside Sannie. Ever since he’d started hanging out with her again, he noticed Doctor August immediate and decided dislike for him. In his time as sheriff, Roy had come across a variety of criminals and Doctor August acted exactly like one. He was shifty and rude, and eager to get rid of him at every turn.

Thankfully, Sannie seemed as eager to spend time with Roy as he was. She welcomed his presence near her and invited him over to their seat even if Doctor August protested. Over the last few days, the doctor had taken to leaving the table altogether, and conducting his part of the consultation from the other side of the bar.

“He’s not a very friendly guy,” Sannie explained to Tom. “But he has a good heart. And he’s very good at his job, too.”

“Well, you’re the star of the show,” Tom said, clapping his hands together. “I’m hoping you’ll consider staying in town for a while, honey. I’d be thrilled to let you live here rent free so long as you do your soothsayin’ right here.”

“Wow!” Sannie breathed, leaning back with wide eyes. “Are you serious?”

“Are you lookin’ around?” Tom asked, waving his hands around at the jovial throng in his tavern. “You’re just excellent for

business! If you open up your own shop and move away, I'd lose much more than your rent."

"Tom, that is so gracious," Sannie said, shaking his hand.

The innkeeper thanked her again before disappearing in the crowd to mingle.

"You're making fast friends," Roy commented, taking a sip of his champagne. He'd already finished his first glass and Tom had graciously sent over another.

"The people in this town are really nice," Sannie said, staring around her with a certain distance in her deep brown eyes.

"What are you thinking?" Roy blurted out, unable to stop himself.

She sighed deeply, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I'm wondering how long this is all gonna last."

Roy felt his stomach drop at her statement. “Are you planning to leave?”

“I don't know,” she replied.

Roy swallowed nervously. His mouth suddenly felt rather dry. He leaned forward so that his hair shielded his eyes from her gaze. “Tom would have a fit if you left. I’ve never seen him happier.”

Sannie chuckled quietly, taking a long draught from her glass. Roy eyed her carefully as his mind wrestled with the words she was saying.

*It's like she's come here to do something—not the soothsaying. No, the soothsaying is clearly a cover. Roy finished his drink in one large sip. What could Sannie have come here to do? Was she looking for me?*

Roy recalled the shock on her face when she saw him in that alley near the inn and decided against that theory. *No way. She*



*was shocked as I'd been. She didn't know I was here.*

Across the tavern, Doctor August was seated by the bar with his cold beer in his hands. He was no longer alone, however. The widow Matilda Best, heir to the immense Best fortune and the fabled diamonds of Victoria sat beside him, deep in focused conversation.

In an instant, the pieces fell together in Roy's head. As he gazed at the widow Best surrounded by three burly bodyguards, he finally understood what Sannie was doing in Little Rosa.

"My God," Roy murmured. "You're here for the diamonds."

"What?" Sannie asked, looking up from her glass quizzically.

"The diamonds," Roy said, his eyes boring deep into her chocolate irises. "Victoria's diamonds! The ones Best's husband would never stop bragging about!" Roy

slapped the table with his palm lightly. "That's why you're in Little Rosa!"

The ghost of surprise passed over Sannie's features but she controlled her features in an instant.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, turning away from him with an air of nonchalance.

"Aw, come on, Carson, you can't fake it with me," Roy said with a chuckle. "Your partner, the doctor, has been ignoring everyone the entire night but he's suddenly getting sweet on the widow?"

Sannie's gaze flitted over to the bar and back. "She's an important client of ours. He's just doing his job."

"Okay, sure," Roy said, taking another sip of his drink. "She's really religious, did you know that? From what I remember of her, she wouldn't let a witch near her with a ten foot pole in between."

“You think I’m a witch?” Sannie raised a dark brown eyebrow.

“Matilda Best will,” Roy replied firmly. The glass of liquor was cold in his hands. “Her family built the largest church in the county. They’re as Christian as they come.”

Sannie shrugged. “My practice is perfectly godly and she knows that.”

“Really?” Roy challenged her. “Had she called you for a single reading?”

Sannie cleared her throat, her brown eyes looking decidedly away from him. “Actually, she did, yes.”

“Oh, and she’s a regular of yours now?”

“Well, she hasn’t actually called me back after my first meeting—” Sannie began.

“I knew it,” Roy interjected.

*“But she has been calling August back regularly. She really finds his services to be useful,”* Sannie finished with her chin held high. Her creamy cheekbones glowed in the tavern’s dim lights, her eyes like two pools of milk chocolate. She sank her teeth into her luscious lower lip. The sight made something shift in Roy’s stomach.

*I’ve had enough liquor,* he decided, pushing his glass away from him.

“You’ve become a lightweight,” Sannie noted coyly, giving him a smirk.

“I don’t like to drink much,” Roy replied with a shrug. “Feels like a waste of time.”

“Who would have thought?” Sannie whispered breathily. Her cheeks were flushed pink from the champagne.

“What does that mean?” Roy asked her.

“It’s just that ... you’ve changed so much,” Sannie said softly, the crimson shades in her face darkening.

“Have I, really?” Roy asked curiously.

“Yeah! You’re a *sheriff*!” Her large, chocolate eyes turned slightly misty as she gave him a small smile. “People care about you, they respect you! I-I’m really happy you found a home, Roy.”

Roy watched her delicate face with the tempo of his heart steadily rising. How could he explain to her how miserable he’d been without her? How could he describe how small everyone else’s affections felt in comparison to hers? Roy opened his mouth to put words to his emotions, but the words were few and he was grossly overwhelmed. His eyes fluttered to the clock that hung on the wall and he swore.

“I have to be at the jailhouse in fifteen minutes!” he said, standing up from his seat. “I

have to meet Philip there.”

“Do you have to go right now?” Sannie asked. The longing in her voice made Roy’s heart swell.

“Yeah, the Pinkertons are coming to town and I must meet them,” Roy said, throwing his jacket around his shoulders. Sannie watched him from her seat, her svelte form glowing under the flickering lamps.

“The Pinkertons are coming?” she asked, a crease forming between her shapely eyebrows. “Why?”

“I’ll find out when I meet them,” Roy replied. He took a pause—just for a moment—and then stretched his hand out toward Sannie. She reached forward and shook it with a small smile on her face.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” he asked her hopefully.

She nodded eagerly, her gorgeous smile widening.

Roy dearly wished to spend more time with her but the meeting scheduled for today was important. He quickly went through the customary goodbyes with Tom and a few other people and hurried over to the stables. Witch stomped her feet excitedly as she sensed him coming.

Roy rode Witch from the inn to the jailhouse, enjoying the chilly evening wind whipping against his frame. The champagne's effect still persisted, but since he'd only had a few glasses, he felt perfectly in control. The lights of the jailhouse were on and Roy spotted them from far away. He leaned over Witch's back and urged her to go a bit faster.

When he reached the stables, Roy dismounted Witch and decided to take some time and feed her an apple. She seemed happy to have his attention for a few moments and chewed on his offering loudly, making flecks of apple juice spurt out of the fruit. Once she'd eaten the last of the apple, Roy unsaddled her

and untied his bags from the grips.

Once he entered the jailhouse, Roy noted the new differences in his environment right away. Phillip stood by his desk with his shirt tucked in for the first time in his life. Roy raised an eyebrow at him. The deputy gave him a small, tight smile.

The office was neater, too. All the files were stacked on top of one another properly and a vase of fresh flowers was placed in the center of the reception table. Roy surveyed the office feeling mildly impressed, walking closer to Phillip.

“Did you do all this?” Roy asked him as he neared.

“Yes, sir.” His tone was stiff.

“Are they in there?” Roy asked, staring at his office door. “The Pinkertons?”

“Yes, they’re inside. Where were you,



sir?" Philip asked him.

"I was keeping an eye on the soothsayer," Roy replied, taking off his jacket and placing it on a nearby chair. "Making sure she and her partner aren't up to something."

"You've been keepin' an eye on her a lot," Philip said in a muted tone.

Roy glanced up at him sharply. "Excuse me?"

Philip sighed, looking around him furtively. "It's nothing, Boss. I just haven't seen you like this on any other case—"

"Did the Pinkertons say what they wanted?" Roy interrupted curtly.

"No, sir, they didn't," Philip said with deference. "They seemed eager to speak with you, though."

"Excellent," Roy said, walking toward

the door of his office. "I'll talk to you once I get back. I don't wish to keep them waiting."

"Yes, sir," Philip said plainly. Roy nodded and turned to walk through the mahogany doors into his office, avoiding Philip's eye. It was true; he was paying Sannie more attention than he would have some other person in her place. He wasn't surprised that Philip had noticed the afternoons he spent away and the new, quiet happiness Roy's face shone with each time he returned to the jailhouse.

Roy pushed the matter to the back of his mind. There were Pinkertons to attend to. He hadn't met with them before, and he was rather curious to see what he would find. When Roy opened his door, he found four men inside his small but stately office. Three of them stood at attention while one of them was seated on the chair across the Sheriff's desk.

"Gentlemen," Roy said, causing all the heads to turn to him. "I'm Roy Harting. I'm—"

“Sheriff, hello!” the seated man said, leaning on a black wooden cane to stand up. He was dressed in a dark grey suit jacket, a grey vest, and a black Stetson. “I’m Agent Lester Harrell,” he said.

With his handlebar moustache and greying eyebrows, Agent Harrell looked like a rather aged player in the game. He had a polite, but smug grin on his face as he reached out to shake Roy’s hand.

“Good to meet you, Agent,” Roy said with a firm nod. “And you all, too.”

“Oh, this is Michael, John, and Keith,” Agent Harrell recited airily. “But their names aren’t that important. In fact you’re likely to have forgotten them by the end of this sentence.”

Roy chuckled as he walked over to his plush leather chair. “I see you’re a man that cuts to the chase.”

“Quite so,” Harrell said with a sage

nod, sitting back down in his seat. The other three men behind him remained in their stiff poses. "And I don't like to waste time."

"That's good news for both of us," Roy replied.

"Correct, again." Harrell grinned cunningly. "Well, here's the situation, Sheriff. There's a man I've been chasing for 'bout three months now. A *real* bastard. He's robbed *seven* banks, back to back. I've got several reports of him being here, in your town."

"You got a name?" Roy asked interestedly.

"Only an alias." Harrell looked displeased with himself. "Kidd Jack. Obviously a bogus name."

"Obviously."

"He's robbed a slew of banks in St. Louis, Partridge, and a couple other towns

along the prairie,” Harrell explained, touching the tips of his weathered fingers together. “He seems to be a travelling bandit of sorts. Just finds towns and robs their banks.”

“We haven't had any bank robberies in the past few months or so,” Roy said. “And we haven't had any new arrivals in weeks.”

“You had new arrivals in town a few weeks ago?” Harrell asked. Roy nodded in response. “That's interesting. Because the reports of Kidd Jack being here also began a few weeks ago.”

Doctor August's brooding figure flashed in Roy's mind. “That's interesting,” Roy said slowly.

“Who were these new arrivals?” Harrell asked him.

“Just ordinary working folk from the country—a soothsayer and an apothecarist.”

“A soothsayer?” Harrell asked.

“Well, she says she can see the future,” Roy shrugged.

“Ah, we’ve got one of those back in my home town, too.” Harrell snorted. He leaned back in his chair. “Robs half the town of their money, but all they really do is talk.”

“A business is a business,” Roy said with a polite smile.

“And the apothecarist?” Harrell asked.

“That’s Doctor August,” Roy replied.

Harrell’s eyebrow rose steadily up his forehead.

“What?” Roy asked him.

“That’s clearly a fake name,” Harrell stated with a knowing smile.

“It does sound like one, doesn’t it?” Roy asked, settling back in his chair. *Could Doctor August be Kidd Jack? No, that’s too much of a coincidence!*

“I had portraits done of the criminal, actually,” Harrell said, waving a finger in the air. One of the men standing behind him reached into his bag and pulled out a file. Harrell reached for the file and opened it, turning it around so Roy could see the sketch.

The minute Roy’s eyes landed on the drawing, he wanted to swear. It was clearly a portrait of Doctor August. *Dammit, Sannie, your partner is a bank robber? Are you a bank robber? Jesus Christ!*

“Have you seen this guy?” Harrell asked.

“He does look familiar,” Roy said slowly. “That’s for sure.”

“Hmm,” Harrel said, nodding. “Now,

Kidd Jack operated alone during these bank robberies—”

Roy looked up from the sketch. “He did?”

“Well, not *alone* alone. He would always have a few goons with him, but none of the goons were permanent. They’d be replaced by other goons sometimes and he would be the only constant one in the team.”

“Were the goons all male?” Roy asked, keeping his voice level.

“That’s an interesting question, Sheriff,” Harrell said, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk. “All bank robberies were done only by males. But Kidd Jack has been spotted doing other, smaller criminal activity. In particular, we’ve received an official complaint about a stagecoach being robbed by someone that looks exactly like him.”

“Okay...” Roy trailed off.



“You know how hard it is to nab any evidence when stagecoaches get robbed,” Harrell said, leaning back in his chair. “A woman came to us last week, saying her stagecoach going from here to St. Louis was robbed by this very man.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Harrell said. “Her name’s Alice Deerwood. Sweet woman, and her daughter lives here in Little Rosa. The point is, she said that when Kidd Jack robbed the stagecoach, there was a *female* accomplice with him.”

Roy felt his stomach twist. *That has to be Sannie.* “Do you have a sketch?”

“Yeah, Alice helped us with that one, too,” Harrell said. “The next page.”

Roy glanced at the picture on the next page and stiffened. It wasn’t an exact likeness, but Roy had no difficulty in recognizing the large, innocent eyes swimming above the plump, curvy lips. He would recognize this

face anywhere.

“A shipment of mail has been reported missing from Little Rosa and the woman who testified and gave us these portraits was travelling in the stagecoach that was supposed to deliver the mail,” Harrell said. “That is the stagecoach these suspects stole from, although what any thief would do with stealing other people’s letters is beyond me.”

Suddenly, the pieces fit together in Roy’s head, almost at once.

*Holy hell! That’s how Sannie’s been guessing people’s future! Roy’s fingers tightened around the file in his hands. She read their mail! That’s how she knew everything!*

Roy looked up at Harrell and back down at the sketch, breathing heavily.

*What have you done, Sannie?*



# Chapter Eleven

## *Confessions of a Robber*

### ***Sannie***

Sannie took a long swig of her champagne setting down the glass onto her table with a decisive thump. Roy had left the tavern ten minutes ago and she was shocked at how bored she suddenly felt.

She'd gotten used to having Roy around pretty quickly over the last couple of weeks. Having four deputies gave Roy the time to come over and meet her during lunch. They would chat, play cards and laugh together almost like they used to before they got separated. Sannie felt her heart flutter the way it used to when his crystal blue eyes looked directly at him. He was as sharp as ever—the only person to see through her mind games.

Sannie took another swig of her drink, draining it. She'd wished Roy had stayed longer. Now that she'd had a few glasses of liquor in her, she felt as though she might

have the strength to answer his question. The one she'd avoided before.

*What happened to you, Sannie? After we got separated? What did you ... do?*

The past five years flashed through Sannie's mind in a blur of emotions. *Everything I did, I did to survive.*

"We need to talk," Sannie heard Ivan's voice from beside her, pulling her out of her confused thoughts. She looked up wearily. The day had been long and the alcohol had really drained the last of her energy.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

Ivan had a tight, measured look on his face as he glanced at the crowd around them warily. "Everything's fine, but we need to talk," he said. "Come on, you've had enough to drink."

Sannie scrunched her face with

annoyance but stood up and followed him nonetheless. She waved an airy goodbye at Tom before she headed up the stairs to the first floor of the inn.

Ivan's steps were hard and fast as he strode to their room. He unlocked the door and waited for Sannie to walk in, one hand resting on the handle. He turned around to glance warily around the corridor, no doubt making sure that they weren't followed.

"All right," Sannie said as she entered their room. "What's going on?"

"The sheriff," Ivan said, his slate-colored eyes flashing fearfully. "I think he's onto us."

Sannie raises an eyebrow, crossing her arms across her chest. "He's *onto* us?"

"Yeah! He knows we're scamming the townsfolk," Ivan stated.

“So what?” Sannie shrugged. “Our business isn’t illegal. We have nothing to fear.”

“I think he knows about why we came here,” Ivan said. “I think he knows we’re gonna try to steal something. From somewhere —”

“How would he—”

“If he knows about the diamonds, he might already know that we’re here to steal them!” Ivan continued.

“All right, calm down for a second—”

“Dammit, Sannie, don't tell me to calm down!” Ivan yelled, his messy blonde hair flinging about. “That ... *nutcase* has been coming here, watchin’ us for weeks! He’s hovering around you like a fly over shit!”

“All right!” Sannie cried, raising a strict hand in the air. “You watch your tone with me! And for your information, I’m the one

who's been making an effort to schmooze the sheriff so that we don't get into trouble!"

"Oh, you're schmoozing him?" Ivan asked her mockingly. "How exactly are you doing that?"

Sannie let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm a beautiful, intelligent woman and the sheriff finds that ... favorable."

"Favorable?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yes!" Sannie exclaimed. "I'm actually being useful while you spend all afternoon at the Best mansion doing god knows what! If you could get her to call me over for a reading —"

"I *told* you, Sannie, she hates ya," Ivan said bluntly. "She thinks you might be a witch and there's no way she's letting you work your voodoo on her."

"And I accept that," Sannie said,



pressing her hand against her chest. “So while you’re busy schmoozing her, I’m running our business and getting on the good side of the sheriff! If we wanna stay in Little Rosa, being in good graces with the sheriff is of the utmost —”

“No, we’re not doing any of that.” Ivan’s statement was final. “Need I remind you that we’re career criminals? We can’t be sauntering around with law enforcement folks, waiting to be caught!”

“Ivan, you don’t—”

“No, we’re putting an end to this!” Ivan’s nostrils were flared and red. “We’re gonna do what we came here to do and get out, dammit! We’re stealing those diamonds by the end of this week!”

Sannie felt her heart stutter with fear at his statement. *A week! A week is not enough! I just ... I just got here!* She brought her hands together calmly, trying to control her tone.

“Ivan,” she began carefully, “we can’t do this in one week. We have no plan, no way for both of us to be at the mansion, and we haven’t done any scouting. We have no idea where the diamonds could be!”

“I can find out,” Ivan said with a shrug. “I can do it.”

“How?” Sannie challenged him, placing her hands on her waist. “If I don’t go there with you, how are you gonna have enough time away from the widow to scout the mansion?”

“I will *find* a way,” Ivan snapped, defiance blazing in his eyes. “What I can’t do is be stuck here with Officer Blue Eyes watching my every move!”

“Fine,” Sannie mumbled, her gut twisting within her. “If you find a way to get the diamonds, let’s do it.”

“Excellent,” Ivan growled. He turned away from her and stalked to his bed, taking

off his jacket and his vest in stiff, angry motions. Sannie watched him for only a moment before walking into the privacy of her room and shutting the door behind her.

Sannie placed her back against the cool surface of the door, taking deep breaths to calm herself. It wasn't working, however. The idea of being on the road again brought tears to Sannie's eyes. She was done with the life of a fugitive, a thief. She wanted her own room, her own bed. She wanted freshly cooked meals and friends to share it with. She wanted to talk to people rather than watch them run away from her. Anxiety, so acute and painful, twisted within her chest, tightening it so she could barely breathe.

A sharp *clack* against her window caught her attention. Sannie looked up through a haze of tears at the starry evening outside her window. A small rock flew up and hit her window with another *clack*.

Wiping her tears with her sleeve, Sannie walked over to her window gingerly, peeking over the edge at the lamp-lit street

below.

Roy's bright blue eyes were clear even from this distance.

*What is he doing back here?* Sannie wondered, sniffing. Roy waved her down with his arm. Sannie sighed, glancing at her bedroom door and then back.

When she went out into the hall, she saw that Ivan was already in bed with a blanket over him. His eyes were open though and he seemed to be deep in thought.

"I'm just gonna head down for a bit," Sannie said as she put on her jacket, making him look up. "I left a few gold coins with Tom at the bar."

"Can't you get them in the morning?" he asked her with mild annoyance.

"No, I'm sure I'll forget by then," Sannie said, closing their room door as she walked

out.

She hurried downstairs, huddling into her coat as she stepped into the bitter wind. When she saw Roy downstairs, she instantly knew something was wrong. His eyes were flat and tense, his shoulders hunched together as his body stood utterly still under the nearby tree. *More bad news?* Sannie wondered and she neared him, crossing her arms against her chest.

“Hey,” she said, giving him a smile which he didn’t return. “What’s going on?”

Roy sighed, his sea blue eyes looking up at her through thick dark lashes. “The Pinkertons came to town today.”

“Yeah, you told me,” Sannie said, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Did you meet with them?”

“Yeah, I did,” Roy said in an odd tone.

“Well?” Sannie asked, blinking. “Who are they looking for?”

“You,” Roy said plainly. “You and Doctor August.”

Sannie gasped, taking a step away from Roy. *The Pinkertons? Looking for us? How can this be?*

“What? Why?” she demanded. *Do the Pinkertons really care about two puny stagecoach robbers?*

“Apparently, Doctor August is guilty of robbing *banks*,” Roy said with a guarded expression. “Seven of them, to be exact.”

“What?” Sannie asked with a short laugh. “Ivan’s not a bank robber!” She immediately stiffened; she’d said the wrong name. Roy didn’t miss it, either.

“Ivan?” he asked instantly, his eyes bright. He moved closer to her with his hands

tucked into his pockets. “Is that his real name?”

Sannie sighed. “Yes, it is.”

“Well, *Ivan* has been robbing banks left, right, and center,” Roy said firmly. “The Pinkertons have decisive reports of him robbing banks in St. Louis and Partridge—”

“He would have told me,” Sannie said, narrowing her eyes at Roy. “I would never do something as risky and stupid as robbing a bank.”

“You’re saying you have no idea that your partner was doing this?” Roy asked, raising an eyebrow with a small, hopeful grin on his pink lips.

“I...” Sannie thought back to all the nights that Ivan had spent away from her, saying he was meeting with friends and informants. She had been comfortable with that arrangement. She cherished the time that she got alone, away from Ivan’s urgent

presence. When he returned, he always had more information, as well as some money and food that he said his friends left for him in a secret location.

*Could he ... have been robbing banks this whole time? Sannie's eyes lifted up to her window on the first floor. Is that why he was so afraid of Roy? Because he was afraid Roy would find out about all of this?*

"I don't know anything about any bank robberies," Sannie clarified carefully.

"But you robbed stagecoaches with him, right?" Roy asked her. When Sannie didn't respond, he pressed on. "I know you have the mail that was supposed to be delivered to the people here, Sannie. That's how you've been playing soothsayer."

Sannie sighed, looking down at her shoes. *There's no going around it, he already knows.* "Maybe ... maybe I did do that," she acquiesced reluctantly.



Roy's forehead creased, his deep blue eyes shimmering with concern. "Sannie, that's a federal crime."

"Don't tell me about crimes," Sannie snapped at him. "I might not be here, alive, if I hadn't done all these things."

"How many?" Roy asked her abruptly.

Sannie took a step back from him. "What?"

"How many stagecoaches did you rob?" he asked.

Sannie barked out a laugh. "It is astonishing to me that you think I'm obligated to answer your questions."

"I am the sheriff!"

"I am not just another citizen!" Sannie shot back instantly.

“That was never my implication.” Roy’s expression was guarded, his chiseled jaw set.

“Then what?” Sannie hissed. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m trying to *help* you,” Roy said, moving forward, his eyes blazing with icy fires. “I don’t want the Pinkertons to eat you up and they *will* if they find out who you are. I can only help you if I know exactly what you did—”

“Who even asked you for your help?” Sannie demanded, throwing her arms in the air. She resisted the fear that swelled in her belly at the mention of the Pinkertons. “I don’t recall doing that!”

“Are you saying you can handle the interrogation by yourself?” Roy challenged.

“Well, do they have a sketch of me?” Sannie placed her hands on her waist.

“Yes, they do,” Roy replied evenly. “Your sketch is recognizable. The moment they see you, they will *know*.”

Sannie shook her head angrily, grinding her teeth. “I cannot believe this. Damn it, Ivan! Did he *really* do this?”

“Yes, he did,” Roy’s reply was firm, devoid of compassion.

Sannie tried to take in a deep breath, but her chest felt strangely constricted. *Pinkertons. Pinkertons after Ivan and me.*

“I don’t understand something,” she said weakly. “They’re looking for Ivan because of the bank robberies. Why are they looking for me?”

“The stagecoach you robbed? The one in St. Louis?” Roy asked.

“Yeah,” Sannie prodded him.

“Someone came forward and filed an official complaint,” he said.

“Did you find out who it was?”

“Some woman called Alice Deerwood,” Roy replied.

The name immediately caused Sannie to stiffen up. Alice’s kind, aging face appeared in her mind, making her heart twist. *Of course she complained. She thought I was her friend and I betrayed her.*

She suddenly felt Roy’s warm fingers tighten around her arm. The sensation sent electric shocks through her. She was partly breathless as he turned her to look her deep in her eyes. His sapphire orbs bored into her like icy crystals.

“I’m not gonna let you get caught,” Roy promised her in a low voice. “I promise you. But if I’m gonna help you, I need you to help me. You have to tell me the truth.”

Sannie took in a deep, staggering breath. Her heart rebelled against relying on him again, afraid of old mistakes. *I have to get out of this myself. I can't depend on other people to help me.* Slowly, but surely, she yanked her arm out of Roy's grasp, giving him a level look.

"I don't need your help," she said plainly. "I will handle the interrogation on my own."

Roy pulled away from her, his eyes flattening as his shields went up. "Very well then," he said. "Show up at the jailhouse at 11:30 AM tomorrow for your questioning."

"Fine," Sannie said with a shrug, turning away from him. She'd barely taken two steps away from him when he called her name.

"Sannie!" he said, his voice clear in the dead quiet of the night. Sannie looked over her shoulder at his handsome face.

“Are you ever gonna trust me again?”  
he asked her simply.

Sannie turned back to the path before her, her mind galloping to faraway places. “I’ll see ya tomorrow, Sheriff,” she said coolly, resuming her walk toward the inn’s gate. Roy didn’t call out to her again. She felt bouts of violent urges to turn around and glance at him, but thankfully, she held her own.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Sannie was greeted by the amber rays of daylight. The light outside was bright, throwing golden rays on the leafy trees. Sannie was joyously comfortable for a couple of moments before she remembered what was to come today.

*The Pinkerton interrogation. Dammit.*

Sannie glanced away from the shine of the day outside her window, taking in deep breaths. She slowly sat up on her bed, inhaling the scent of the morning. *I need a ride*, she decided.

Dressing up in an ivory skirt and a fitted, lilac jacket, Sannie grabbed her things and walked out of her room. Ivan was still sprawled across the bed, snoring lightly with his head hanging off the edge. Sannie hovered for a moment, wondering if she ought to wake him and tell him about the Pinkertons right away.

*I'll tell him when I'm back,* Sannie decided with a shrug, carefully opening their room's front door and slipping out into the corridor. Sannie wolfed down a plate of eggs at the inn's tavern and then grabbed a bowl of oats for Lady to eat. By the time she fed, brushed and saddled lady, it was already eleven.

The road to the jailhouse was already busy, with children running about and street vendors rolling their carts down the country roads, selling their goods. Sannie galloped alongside them on Lady, admiring the quiet permanence of life in a town. Most of these people lived predictable days, with no concern for where they would get their next plate of food. None of them had that haunted, weathered look inherited by decades of being

afraid for one's life.

Sannie scrunched up her face as she looked ahead at the dusty road. *Stop going to the dark place*, she instructed herself. *You're about to sit in an official interrogation with an officer of the law. You have to be ... perfect.*

Sannie drew herself up on Lady, practicing the poise she wanted to demonstrate. She rode in that stance all the way till the jailhouse. Once she'd safely tucked Lady into the county stables, Sannie tied her voluminous hair into a high bun and placed her feathery, green hat on top.

She then reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out two silken white gloves. She slipped them onto her hands and turned to face the jailhouse.

*Ready*, Sannie thought to herself.

The inside of the jailhouse was less busy than Sannie expected. Painted with hues of cream and brown, the jailhouse had a



temporary holding cell on one side occupied by a few, weary looking delinquents. One of them whistled at Sannie, who looked away, acting as though she hadn't heard him at all. On the other side were three desks piled with towers of files. Only one person was hard at work at one of the desks. The rest of the desks were empty, except for a really old, decrepit-looking man who was seated on a chair. He looked as though he was waiting for someone.

Sannie walked up to the desk where a man was hunched over a file, his pen scribbling rapidly on the paper. His name plate read, *Deputy Wise*.

"Deputy Wise?" Sannie asked. The young man looked up at her.

"Deputy Wise isn't here," he said. "I'm his junior. All the Deputies and the Sheriff have gone for the parade training to Lambdon Park."

"Uh..." Sannie glanced around herself unsurely. "Do you have any idea when the

sheriff will be back?”

“Not anytime soon, ma’am,” the guy said, shutting his file and moving on to the next one. “Who are you?”

“Madame Cassandra.”

The young man looked up. “How can I help you?”

“I came here to see the Pinkerton agent?” Sannie asked.

“Agent Harrell, yes. Wait right here,” the young man said, getting up off his seat. He walked toward the door of the sheriff’s office and disappeared behind its rich, mahogany door.

“I’m waitin’ for the sheriff, too,” the old, hunched man croaked from beside Sannie. She glanced at him from the corner of her eyes. He was giving her a soft, kind smile. “I brought him these tea cakes. They’re his

favorite.”

“Yeah he does like those, actually,” Sannie said, nodding. She looked at the man appraisingly. “How do you know that?”

“Well, I took care of him for years, I ought to know his favorite food,” the old man croaked back. “Wait, how do you know Roy likes teacakes? Who are you?”

Sannie frowned. “I’m Cassandra. Who are you?”

The old man gave her an odd look, running his eyes up and down her body.

“What?” Sannie asked warily.

“No way...” the old man breathed. “You’re not... It couldn’t be. Are you *Sannie*?”

Sannie’s eyes widened with shock and a bit of dread. “How do you know that name?” she whispered.

“Dear Lord, it’s really you,” the old man said with a chuckle, shaking his head.

“Have we met before?” Sannie asked him curiously.

“No, we haven’t,” the old man replied, slowly sitting down on the deputy’s chair. “But I’ve heard of you often enough that I’d like to think I could recognize ya.”

“You’ve heard of me?” *Is he talking about knowing Madame Cassandra?*

“Yes,” the old man said with a toothy smile. “Roy has told all about you, Sannie.”

Sannie’s eyes widened as she stared at the pale, wrinkled man. His eyes were nearly as grey as his skin, making him look like a ghost. “What?” she asked, her question a mere whisper.

“Oh, that boy talked about you for

days.” The man waved his hand casually, as though he were discussing the weather. “Sannie, Sannie, Sannie. He nearly *died* try’na find ya. And now, here you are!”

“Okay, *what* are you talking about?” Sannie asked him, sitting on the edge of her seat. “When did this happen?”

The old man looked confused. He tilted his head to one side, his grey eyes surveying her. “Has Roy not told you?”

“No...” Sannie leaned forward. “Told me what?”

The old man began to chortling to himself. “That chucklehead. So clever at times and such an idiot at others.”

Sannie shook her head at him indignantly. “You *need* to be clearer.”

The man chuckled. “Roy mentioned you had a sharp tongue.”

“Roy talked about me to you?” Sannie asked him. “Why? Who are you?”

“I am the one who brought Roy to Little Rosa, dearie,” the old man said with a sage grin on his wrinkled face. “My name is Alfred Hancock. I took care of Roy for five years on my ranch by the town’s border.”

“You took care of Roy?” Sannie asked, her eyes widening. “You took him in?”

“Yes.” The old man nodded.

“May I ask when?”

“Of course you may, dearie,” Alfred said, displaying two missing bottom teeth. “Well let’s see, it was about five years ago, almost to this day? Yes. I found the boy in the middle of the desert, dyin’ of thirst. He had a bruise on his head and a big cut on the lipper. He was mumbling a lot, seein’ things. He was *not* in his senses.”

Sannie gasped. "He never told me anything about this."

"Course he didn't. The kid has more pride than the town combined." Alfred leaned back in his chair, resting his wrinkly arms against the sides. "The way he was when I found him, I couldn't make out a word of what he was sayin' other than the fact that he was searchin' for someone. He kept pushin' me away when I tried to put 'im on my cart. Kept sayin' 'I have to go back. Sannie, Sannie, Sannie.'. Wouldn't tell me who Sannie was or where she was, but he kept ramblin' about it. The boy was parched and had a fever, too. He would've died had I found him three hours later."

"What happened then?" Sannie asked him in a hushed voice.

"Well, he wouldn't come with me and he was bein' an idiot so I slapped him to calm 'im down. Knocked 'im right out." The old man shook his head slowly. "Boy, he was weak. I hauled 'im onto my cart and took him

to the ranch. My wife bandaged him up and made him some soup. She was a kind one, may God rest her soul.”

“Your wife died?” Sannie’s voice was small.

“Two years it’s been,” he said, his graying eyes taking on a faraway look. “She loved Roy, you know. We never had any children of our own and we were happy to have him there.”

“He lived with you?”

“Yes, he did. For almost three years, before he got his own place in the city. It was rough goin’ in the beginning—he ran away from the house often, sometimes he even stole a horse.”

“He ran away?” Sannie asked. “Why?”

“To look for you,” Alfred said plainly. “He wouldn’t tell us much, but we knew you



meant a lot to him. We couldn't stop him from searchin' for you. He would ride for days at times and come back all scratched up 'n dirty. He wouldn't be able to sleep at home, so he'd ride out again. One time, the horse he took with him died on the way back. She broke her leg." Sannie winced.

Alfred sighed heavily. "He stopped searchin' after that. Took him six whole months to stop. My wife and I thought he'd kill himself searchin' for ya, so we were relieved. Roy turned to the books, began to work at the old sheriff's office. He grew up a lot."

Sannie sniffled. She hadn't realized that the tears had pooled in her eyes and leaked out the corners. *Why did you never tell me, Roy? That's how much you looked for me?* She clutched her chest, taking shallow breaths as a lump rose in her throat.

"Are you okay, dearie?" Alfred asked her with concern radiating from his aged face.

“Yes, sir, I...” Sannie cleared her throat, wiping her face with her sleeve. “I never knew all that stuff.”

“That boy loves you,” Alfred said as he stood up, wincing as his joints caused him pain. “I hope he’s told you that much.”

Sannie shrugged at the old man. “In his own words.”

The man chuckled, reaching forward to place a hand on her shoulder. “I’m glad he found you. I really am.”

“Thank you,” Sannie whispered with a watery smile.

“I’ve gotta visit the physician for the old back,” the old man said, gently turning away from her. “Will you tell Roy I came by?” he asked.

“Certainly, sir.”

“And tell him about the tea cakes,” Alfred winked. “They’re his favorite.”

“Aye.”

The old man hobbled over to the entryway of the jailhouse, tilting his weathered hat so it covered his face.

“Sir?” Sannie called to him.

He spun to glance at her. “Yes, dearie?”

“Thank you for telling me everything,” she said.

Alfred gave her a toothy, cheery smile and waved at her as he walked away. Sannie watched him as he left the jailhouse, trying to still the rapid rhythm of her heart.

\*\*\*

It was almost twelve thirty before the Pinkerton Agent got free. Sannie watched as the people he’d previously been meeting with streamed out of the Sheriff’s office. They all

seemed to be in relatively stable mental states as they emerged through the door.

*Good. The agent must not be a ball busting troublemaker, then, Sannie thought as she waited for her turn. I can handle just about anything else.*

The young man that was a junior to the deputies poked his head out of the sheriff's office. "Agent Harrell is ready for ya, ma'am."

Sannie stood up, nervously straightening her skirt. The young man stepped out of the office and opened the doors wide for Sannie to pass through. She gave him a thankful smile and walked into the sheriff's office, her boots clacking on the hardwood floor.

Roy's office was cozy and warm. The walls were the same cream hue as the sitting area of the jailhouse. A stately, mahogany bookshelf lined the right side of the wall, filled with books from top to bottom. In the center of the office, behind a shining, dark wood

desk, sat a bespectacled, rugged looking man. He wore a clean, pressed shirt, a silken, silver vest and a dark grey Stetson hat. He had greyish brows and a grey moustache, but a tight, youthful face. He gave Sannie a pleasant smile, revealing two dimples in his cheeks.

“Are you Madame Cassandra?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“Yes, sir,” Sannie said. “You must be Agent Lester Harrell.”

“I am, my lady,” the agent said, stretching out his hand for Sannie to shake. “You must be the soothsayer the people of this town keep raving about.”

“Well, well, well...” Sannie fluttered her eyelashes him. “You’re certainly very charming.”

Harrell chuckled heartily, his cheeks turning slightly pink. “Why thank you, Madame. I must say, people failed to adequately describe just how stunning you

are.”

Sannie let out a twinkling laugh. “They’re usually too entranced by my brains.”

“Ho ho, you’re a very clever woman,” the agent’s eyes sparkled at her. “I don’t see many of those around.”

Sannie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I’m not like other women, Agent.”

“I can see that,” he said with a grin. “Tell me, how does a beautiful woman like yourself get stuck doin’ a soothsayin’ scam?”

Sannie looked up to him with confidence in her eyes. “You know, soothsaying is a lot more complex than just guessing people’s future. Most of the time you have to listen carefully when people tell you about their life. Then you make a prediction that they will do something that you know they want to do.”

“Wow,” Lester said thoughtfully. “And because they already want to do that, they fulfill your prophecy themselves.”

“Exactly.” Sannie leaned back in her seat. “Wives that want to leave their husbands, children that want to know which pet to buy, men that want to know which woman to wed. They all know what they truly want, internally. I just say that it will happen and that confidence makes them do what I predicted.”

“Genius,” Harrell whispered, gazing at Sannie with great interest. “A whole town being cheated by one clever woman.”

“Who’s being cheated?” Sannie asked smartly. “Who’s not hearing what they want to hear when they come to meet me? That is what I’m being paid for! I’m a soothsayer—does me interacting with my patients bring them peace? Yes, it does.” Sannie took in a deep breath as she looked up at Lester. “I have a way with people. I always have. It is my greatest treasure.”

Harrell's eyes widened with awe. "You are one impressive lady, Madame Cassandra."

"Thank you, Agent."

"Please, call me Lester," he interjected with an agreeable smile.

"Lester," Sannie amended with a sugary grin.

"All right, Madame," Lester began, getting up from his chair. He walked with the support of a long, black wooden cane. "Tell me about your partner, Doctor August."

"Well, we met in Louisiana," Sannie began. "Living was stiff there, so we decided to move to Texas to try our luck here." *How much should I tell him? Should I tell him that Ivan used to disappear sometimes? I need to keep myself in the clear.* "He's an excellent apothecarist. He helps people with grief, tremors, and other maladies that need potions."



“Could you please describe Doctor August to me?” Lester asked. “His general physical features?”

“Uh, he has blonde hair, grey eyes and he’s tall—” Sannie began.

Lester opened his drawer and pulled out a cream-colored poster. He rolled the poster out on the table for Sannie to see. It was the portrait of a criminal with a hefty reward written at the bottom. Sannie tried to control her reaction when her eyes met the picture, but it was tough. They had gotten Ivan’s portrait *pat* down. There was no mistaking this was him.

“Is that him?” Lester asked pleasantly. “Is that the doctor?”

Sannie looked at the photo with narrowed eyes, judging her response carefully. “I must say, that is a good likening of him.”

“So, you’re saying that is him?” Lester confirmed.

“It looks like him,” Sannie said firmly.

“Madame Cassandra,” Lester rumbled, sitting back down on his chair. “I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this but we believe your partner has been conducting and participating in major crimes across the state. Several people have identified him by his alias. Kidd Jack. He’s robbed three banks in St. Louis and four in Partridge.”

Sannie made her eyes go wide with pretend shock, clutching the collar of her shirt. “No! This can’t be!”

“It is true, Madame.”

“I... He would never!” Sannie cried, her eyes darting left and right as they would if she were confused. “I’m sure you’re mistaken, sir.”

“The sketch is pretty clear, Madame.” Lester said, touching the tips of his fingers together. “Did you never notice any strange behavior on his part? Any trips he used to take

where he wouldn't take you along?"

Sannie shrugged, "I mean sure, sometimes he would disappear for a while, but he always said he was visiting his friends—"

"He used to disappear?" Lester asked, scribbling on a notebook that lay before him. "Can you please elaborate on that part?"

"Well, we travelled across the state together and sometimes that meant riding for days," Sannie explained, folding her hands in her lap. "Sometimes, he would disappear for hours, other times, for days. He would tell me he was meeting his friends and contacts."

"Could you think of the dates of his disappearances, perhaps?" Lester asked interestedly. "That would really make our job easier."

"That might be difficult," Sannie said, biting down on her bottom lip. "It's... It's been a while."

“Madame, you really need to help us here,” Lester said with a frown. “This guy has killed four people in the last three months

“He *what?*” Sannie’s question was a half-shriek.

“He killed four people during his robberies,” Lester repeated. “Ma’am, that man is a criminal and a low life! That is why we need your help.”

Sannie took in deep breaths, her heart pounding in her chest. *Ivan...you’re a murderer? You swore you hated hurting people! You swore to me that you’d never killed! God DAMMIT!*

Her silence was getting to the Agent. “Fine, if you’d like to keep your secrets with you, then perhaps you could help me with this,” Lester said, taking out a second poster from under the desk. He opened it out onto the desk before Sannie. It was portrait as well. “Do you know this woman?” Lester asked her.

Sannie took one look at the portrait and she knew that it was her. It was a good likeness—not excellent, though. A fact that made Sannie hold a neutral expression, somehow. Her heart raced as she recognized the shape of her own eyes, and the bridge of her nose and her mouth. Sannie felt the blood rushing to her neck, slowly but surely.

“I’m not sure,” Sannie said slowly, looking at the image and then back at Harrell.

“Really?” the Agent asked. “Cause I could swear those big, gorgeous eyes are yours.”

“Thank you for the compliment, sir,” Sannie said with a tight smile, “but I really can’t place her—”

“Listen, Madame Cassandra,” Harrell said, leaning forward and folding his hands together. “I’m gonna be straight with ya. We *need* to find Kidd Jack. We’re willing to find all his accomplices and jail every single one of them till we get to him. He’s caused a whole

lot o' trouble in some major towns and he needs to be behind bars. Whatever the Pinkertons need to do to get to him, we will. It's your choice. Do you wanna be on our side, or on his?"

Sannie opened her mouth and then closed it like a fish. *Can I really betray Ivan? I mean, he betrayed me first by getting me into this, but can I really give him away just like that?* Sannie swallowed nervously, staring at Harrell's determined face. *If I don't help him, he's surely gonna throw me behind bars. What am I supposed to do?*

Suddenly, the door of the sheriff's office flew open and Roy stood behind them, his badge gleaming on his freshly pressed clothes. His blue eyes shined at Sannie across the room, who sighed deeply with relief.

"Madame Cassandra, you're very late for our appointment," Roy said, striding into the office.

If Lester was annoyed, he hid it well,

putting on a congenial smile on his serious face as he greeted the sheriff.

“Oh, right,” Sannie said to Roy with a smile. “I *am* late for our appointment. My apologies, Sheriff, my meeting with Lester here started an hour late.”

“Yeah, I held her up for a while, Roy,” Lester said, leaning back in his chair. “We were just discussing Kidd Jack.”

“Well, do you mind taking this up again in the evening?” Roy asked him. “I’ve been waiting for my appointment for a few days now. And, I did already pay for it.”

“Oh, I see,” Lester said with a mild frown. “You really need to know your future right now, huh?”

“Who doesn’t?” Roy asked with a chuckle. “Anyway, I already paid my gold to your partner, so I was hoping we could have our session now, before my heavy work for the day comes up.”

Sannie turned to Harrell. "Is that okay, sir? I could stay longer if you'd like, but there are people booked after the sheriff and then they'll have to wait—"

"All right, all right, you can go now," Lester said with a wave of his hand. "I do have more questions for you so I will be expectin' you back at the jailhouse tonight at nine."

"I will be here, sir," Sannie said with a gracious nod, rising to her feet. She looked up at Roy who nodded at her shortly and said, "Well, I'll see ya, Lester."

"Yes, Sheriff," Harrell said, looking over his glasses. "See if you can keep an eye on the Madame's partner. He's Kidd Jack. He's the one we're goin' after."

Sannie froze, her forehead wrinkling at his words. She opened her mouth to speak but Roy shook his head no, almost imperceptibly so. Sighing, Sannie held her tongue and followed him out of the office, her heart



beating hard inside her chest.

The moment they were through the doors of the sheriff's office, Sannie opened her mouth to speak. Roy turned around and interrupted her before she could start.

“Not here,” he said, his blue eyes scouring the jailhouse. “Let’s go outside.”

Nodding, Sannie followed Roy out of the jailhouse and into the street outside. He led her away from the entrance, toward the stables where there were fewer people around. When Roy was satisfied that they wouldn’t be overheard, he turned around to face Sannie.

“You came,” Sannie whispered to him, brushing errant strands of her hair away from her face. “Why?”

“I promised I wouldn't let you get caught didn't I?” Roy replied in a smooth voice, his eyes boring into hers.

Sannie felt a lump rise threateningly to her throat once more. "Is it true?" she asked Roy.

"What?"

"That Ivan killed someone?" Her question was a croak.

Roy sighed heavily, his luminous eyes turning to the ground. "The reports do say that Kidd Jack shot four people fatally during his St. Louis robberies."

A sob escaped Sannie's mouth, and her hand rushed up to cup it shut. She couldn't help it. She was exhausted. The years on the run, finding Roy again, being terrified of the law, learning that not only was Ivan a bank robber but also a *murderer*... It was all too much for Sannie. Her heart had grown weary of all the lies and deception, and her shoulders hunched under the weight of her past. She felt Roy's arm cup her shoulder and she leaned into his touch, covering her face so he wouldn't see her tears.

“God dammit, Sannie,” Roy mumbled as he held her close. “I’m so sorry.”

Sannie pulled away from sniffing loudly. She remembered the story Alfred Hancock had told her. About how Roy had almost died trying to search for her.

“Roy, I have to tell you something,” Sannie said suddenly, straightening up.

“What is it?” Roy asked concernedly.

“I wanna tell you what happened to me after we got separated. I wanna tell you *everything*.”



# Chapter Twelve

## *The Greatest Mistake*

**Sannie**

**Partridge, TX, 1882**

*Sannie paced around in her room anxiously, awaiting Roy's return. They'd decided to meet back at the hotel after the fair but he was almost two hours late. Sannie glanced nervously at the ancient-looking grandfather clock whose pendulum swung about with an annoying rhythm. When the sound of keys turning in the door finally reached Sannie's ears, she jumped up from her anxious seat on her dilapidated bed. The door swung open and Roy stepped into their room, taking his hat off of his head.*

*"Hey!" Sannie said with a half-smile. "You're about three hours late."*

*"Yeah, sorry about that," Roy said, shoving his hands into his pockets.*

*“Where were you?”*

*“I told you, I went to meet Ricky.”*

*“Ricky? Again?” Sannie folded her arms across her chest. “Is he still trying to convince you to rob that stagecoach?”*

*Roy rolled his bright blue eyes. “What is your problem with him?”*

*“I don't trust him, okay?” Sannie stated fiercely. “He can get us into a lot of trouble. He has that ... look.”*

*Roy raised an eyebrow. “That look?”*

*“He just wants someone to rob that stupid stagecoach with him! That's why he keeps coming after you!”*

*“Well...” Roy trailed off shiftilly. “Is it really such a bad idea?”*

Sannie gasped. "Roy!"

"Come on, what?" Roy demanded, raising his hands in the air. "Sannie, we're broke. Have you noticed? We've been broke our entire life. We're gonna stay broke and we're gonna die broke, unless we make some real money. If we can find a way to get a hefty bit of gold, we could find a new, faraway town where we can have good, honorable jobs—"

"That doesn't justify robbery, Roy!" Sannie interrupted sternly, brushing her mahogany hair behind her shoulder. "We can get the life we want in other ways. Robbing people is dangerous and it hurts them. You could be shot! You could go to jail!"

"Ricky says most stagecoaches never put up a fight!"

"Then why isn't Ricky a rotten millionaire from robbing stagecoaches, eh?" Sannie demanded, her volume rising. "If he's so sure of himself, why's he so hell bent on taking four men and two guns with him? This is wrong, Roy. This

*is twisted and wrong and I..." Sannie crossed her arms decisively, taking a deep breath. "I don't wanna do it."*

*Roy sighed heavily, failing to hide the bitter disappointment in his eyes. "It's just one shortcut, Sannie."*

*"Even one is too much." Her tone was final. "And you know our agreement. If even one of us says no, then we don't do it. Right?"*

*"Right," Roy agreed, dropping his shoulders. He gave her a tight smile. "Well, all right then. I'll go talk to Ricky tonight and tell him we're out."*

*Sannie frowned. "I thought the robbery was tonight."*

*"No, the stagecoach is delayed," Roy replied plainly, hiding his luminous eyes behind a thick, dark tuft of hair. "The robbery is tomorrow morning."*



*“Oh,” Sannie said lamely, eyeing his expression with narrowed eyes. “Shall we have dinner, then? I got the hotel cook to send us his best stew—apparently I remind him of his daughter...”*

*Roy and Sannie sat down on their bed to share the hot, steaming, chicken stew. Roy ate the stew in silence, giving out only one word, clipped answers to Sannie’s questions. As much as Sannie wanted to believe that Roy was telling the truth, she felt a disturbance in her gut—a bit of doubt she couldn’t shake. He had a shifty look about him as he finished his dinner and an even shiftier look when he prepared to leave to meet Ricky.*

*“Are you sure Ricky’s going to be available right now?” Sannie asked Roy pointedly. He glanced over at her with a guarded expression as he pulled on his jacket.*

*“Yeah, I’m sure he’s there,” he stated quietly. “Just... Just stay here. I’ll be back in no time.”*

*Roy turned to walk out of the door, and*

*Sannie's heart leapt through her mouth.*

*"Roy!" she called. He paused in his path and slowly turned to fix one, brilliantly blue eye on her.*

*"Be careful," she breathed.*

*"Of course I will be," he replied with his signature cocky grin. Only this time, the grin lacked its usual vibrant charisma. It didn't reach his gorgeous eyes. Sannie sighed as he swung the door shut behind him, placing her hands down on the table for support.*

*He's lying, she thought as her chest heaved up and down with heavy breaths. I can't believe he's lying!*

*Sannie turned to face the crude wooden door that stood between them. Come on, maybe he's telling the truth, she tried to convince herself, chewing on the bottom of her lip worriedly. He wouldn't lie to me about a robbery.*

*Another thought occurred to Sannie that made her stiffen up. If he is lying to me, then I just sent the most important person in my life into a dangerous situation, all by himself.*

*Sannie whipped around and picked up their room keys, slipping them into the pocket of her skirt. She packed her tiny knife and her favorite piece of flint, and slowly slipped out of their motel room, glancing around to see if Roy was still in the corridor. She was alone—he'd already taken the stairs down to the dingy lobby of the inn. Sannie rushed over to the stairs just in time to spot Roy's dark brown head passing through the main door.*

*Sannie ran down the stairs after him, holding her skirt in her hands. Before the main door swung shut before her, Sannie almost called out to him. Something made her pause, however, with her lips pursed high in the air.*

*I wanna see where he's going, she decided, exhaling forcefully. If he's telling the truth, he doesn't need to know I doubted him.*

*“Sasha?” the innkeeper called to Sannie with her fake name. He gave her a toothy smile. “Bit late for a nighttime stroll, eh?”*

*“What can I say? We’re adventurous,” Sannie said with a shrug and a flutter of her eyelids. Before the innkeeper could ask more questions, Sannie rushed through the main door, stepping out into the chilly night.*

*Damn it! I should have brought a jacket! Sannie cursed, wrapping her arms around herself. She rubbed her skin harshly, trying to warm up her body. The night time temperature had crashed in the days since the last storm, and gusts of icy, uninterrupted wind burst at her, making her teeth chatter. In the distance she could see Roy’s huddled figure, walking ahead along the road.*

*They were on the outskirts of Partridge, just before the area where the grasslands began to turn into a rocky slope. The roads were wide and the houses were few and far between. Sannie followed Roy along in the darkness, her eyes trained on his tall, lean figure.*

Roy took a left from a nearby barn and then did something Sannie didn't expect—he jumped up the fence and hopped down onto the other side. Glancing around him to make sure no one was around, Roy turned toward the open, wavy field of wheat that lay in front of him. He took a pause before slipping into the darkness between the golden plants, his head tucking into his jacket.

What is he doing? Sannie wondered as she followed behind him carefully. She made sure he was far away before jumping the fence of the barn. If there's a guard dog in here and it bites me... I swear to God, Roy...

Golden yellow wheat crunched underneath Sannie's boots as she followed after him. Roy strode through the maze decisively, as though he knew exactly where he was going. Each time he stopped, moving, Sannie had to make sure to stop moving too so as to not reveal her presence. The fraying ends of the wheat tickled the surface of Sannie's skin, even when she stood still.

She trudged through the field for what felt like a half an hour. Sannie was starting to feel

*frightened—it was dark, and she was terrified of losing track of Roy. She could hear his motion in the grass very clearly, however, and she followed the sound of his footsteps each time she began to feel lost.*

*The walk had warmed Sannie up and she was no longer shivering. But the nighttime insects surrounded her in the tall grass, a fact that made her skin crawl. Where the hell are you headed, Roy? Sannie wondered as she slashed through the vegetation.*

*After about fifteen minutes of trudging through the field, Sannie reached the end of tall grass. She reached forward and parted the last of the plants to make her way, stepping into the vast, deserted hills that lay beyond.*

*In the distance, Sannie could see five men walking around excitedly. She could recognize Roy's tall, thin frame even from this distance. Sannie's scoured the surroundings, trying to guess what these guys were up to. When her eyes went to the right, she saw the lights of a long stagecoach travelling along the country road. It was moving steadily toward the five men, its*

wheels grunting loudly against the loose rocks beneath.

When Sannie's eyes landed on the stagecoach, she gasped. Roy! You lied to me! The stagecoach had neared the robbers now. She narrowed her eyes as she saw one of the boys in the group yell, "HALT! Drop your haul!"

He's robbing someone! Sannie thought angrily as she walked away from the wheat field and into the open. He's actually robbing people! I cannot believe this!

"HALT NOW!" One of the boys yelled again. The stagecoach rattled to a rickety stop. The driver raised his hands in the air as he stepped off of his horse. Sannie tried to zoom in on the robber closest to the driver. She didn't notice before, but Ricky was holding a gun, high in the air, aimed at the driver's face.

Sannie shook her head as she neared them, bitterly disappointed in Roy for participating in something like this. How scared must that driver be? This is cruel!

*Sannie's footsteps crunched against the gritty floor of the desert as she walked toward Roy, her long brown hair blowing behind her in the chilly night time wind. Now that she was out of the cover of vegetation, Sannie felt the cold once more. The skin on her arms flooded with goosebumps as she neared the altercation.*

*The stagecoach door was open now and two of the robbers was pulling things out of the coach and dumping them into a bag on the ground. Ricky—the man who'd recruited Roy for this robbery—stood beside the driver, holding his gun at his sweating head. Roy stood beside Ricky, a knife held up in his hand as he watched the other two robbers collect their loot.*

*Sannie was merely thirty feet away from the altercation when her eyes caught a sudden movement. The driver of the stagecoach had pulled up his arm and elbowed Ricky in the face so hard that he promptly crashed to the ground, his gun falling on the ground beside him. The driver was faster than Sannie expected and lunged for the gun, then raised it in the air. His eyes were wide with rage, his faced flushed. He*



*was ready to shoot someone.*

*“ROY!” Sannie screamed, pulling out her knife. “WATCH OUT!”*

*Roy whipped around to face her, his blue eyes widening with pure shock.*

*“Sannie?” he yelled back.*

*Sannie’s cry had caught the driver’s attention. He raised his gun and aimed it at her, his face scrunching in confusion and fear. Sannie saw his finger move on the trigger and she knew she would get hit.*

*BANG. The sound of the gun going off was clear and deafening. A fraction of a second later, a CRACK rang through the night as the bullet pierced Sannie’s calf, tearing right through her shin bone. The bone shattered so easily, like a fragile pane of glass, that Sannie froze with pure shock. The pain came a second later, so searing hot and maddening that bile rose to the back of her throat. Sannie tried to gulp in air but it didn’t work. The pain wouldn’t let her breathe.*

*“SANNIE!” Roy’s roar echoed in the hills.*

*Sannie collapsed to the ground, unable to carry her body’s weight on her broken leg. As she fell down, her head hit a small clump of rocks that littered the desert ground, causing blood to spill out of her hair in a single line of bright red. The world turned hazy then, her senses beginning to mix together. It was all too much. The pain, the gun, the fear, the shimmery stars in the sky, Roy calling out her name over and over again...*

*His voice was soothing Sannie. He was saying her name.*

*Sannie’s eyes fluttered shut.*

*All the world turned black.*

*\*\*\**

*Sannie and Roy sat by a bench near the stables, beside the wide, busy street of the jailhouse. Sannie took in a deep breath as she gazed at her surroundings, drinking them in. I am not in danger anymore.*

“I want to tell you everything that happened,” Sannie said, pulling herself up to her full height as she looked up into Roy’s eyes. “I’m ready.”

“Okay,” Roy said, eyeing her with a guarded expression. “I’m ready, too.”

“I was shot in the calf. The bullet shattered my shin bone,” Sannie began bluntly. Roy flinched. She continued on. “It was... It was the most pain I have ever felt in my life. I could swear that my leg was on fire but it was barely bleeding. When I went down, I hit my head on one of those small rocks and then everything was a haze. I remember hearing your voice, but I couldn’t see anything. For the first time, I truly thought I was gonna die. When I came to, there was no one around me. Not another soul.”

“You didn’t see what happened to me?” Roy asked her, his forehead wrinkling in the center.

“No,” Sannie shook her head. “I remember nothing after the gunshot, except for the pain.”

Roy sighed. “The driver made us get into the stagecoach. He said he was gonna take us to a jailhouse in the next city. I wanted to come to you, but he threatened to shoot me if I moved.”

“He shot me,” Sannie said softly. “Didn’t he come back to see if I was ... alive?”

“He did.” Roy’s voice was a growl. “He didn’t know you hit your head. He just saw you lying on the ground, unconscious, and he just lost it.”

“He lost it?” Sannie asked.

“Yeah, we told him you weren’t robbing him with us. He thought he’d killed someone innocent,” Roy said, his teeth grinding together. “When he said he thought you were dead... I just jumped on him. I know, he had a gun, but I couldn’t think straight at that point.

He and another guy from his stagecoach had to knock me out to get me under control. They took Ricky, his goons and I all the way to Amherst before we could surprise them with a fight and get away.”

“Amherst?” Sannie asked, shocked.

“Yeah, it took me two days to walk back,” Roy said wearily.

“You *walked* back?”

“What else could I do? Who can a robber on the run go to for help?” Roy shook his head with a dark laugh. “You were my whole life, Sannie. My family. Everything. I couldn’t do much else except walk around, looking for you.”

Sannie listened to him in silence, the tempo of her heart rising.

“What...” Roy cleared his throat, shutting his brilliant eyes for an instant. “What

did you do when you woke up alone in the desert?”

Sannie swallowed as the tortured memories returned. “I panicked at first, of course. I screamed your name so many times I lost my voice. The hills were empty, though. It was just me and my echoes. The moment I realized no one was coming, I knew what I had to do.”

“What was that?” Roy’s question was whispered.

“Protect myself from the coyotes,” Sannie replied with a tiny, grim smile. “I was bleeding quite a bit, and I’d been screaming. I’d definitely attracted a couple of man eaters from around the land. I could hear a few howls in the distance, too. I wanted to find shelter of some kind, but I could see none around me other than the farm we just came through. I couldn’t walk through the field, though. No, that would have been impossible. I could only drag myself to a nearby cavity in the hill. It was tiny, but it was enough for me to light a fire and lie down.

“It was so cold, Roy...” Her tone became lower as the memory of the chilliness of that night made the hair on her neck stand. “I cannot describe it. It was like the ice was digging into my wound. I would have died without a fire. This tiny piece of flint has saved my life many times.” Sannie played with the necklace that rested in her bosom. It was just a chain with a piece of flint as the locket. “I made a fire and passed out beside it. I have no idea how long I slept or how, given the amount of pain I was in. I think I was just blacking out from shock.

“One moment I’m stoking the fire with a stick and holding in screams because I rolled over my leg, and the other I’m stone cold, dead to the world. I have no idea what happened because when I woke up, I wasn’t in the cave.”

Roy raised an eyebrow. “You weren’t?”

“No. I was found by someone. A woman. She carried me to her shelter on her horse. She put a splint on my leg and fed me

water with a dropper. She saved my life.” Sannie looked up at Roy.

“Who was she?” he asked curiously.

“You may have heard of her,” Sannie said with a small smile. “The Bandit Queen?”

Roy’s eyes widened into large, blue saucers. “You’re jesting!”

Sannie shook her head. “No, I’m not.”

“You were found by *the* Bandit Queen?” Roy asked, getting up from his seat with obvious excitement. “She is the most fearsome bandit in the prairies! She has one of the largest, tightest circle of gangs in Texas!”

“I know,” Sannie said seriously. “Her empire is vast and she has informants everywhere. She is a ... formidable woman.”

“Why did she save your life?” Roy asked her.



Sannie shrugged unseeingly. "She saw something in me that she wanted to save. I will always be thankful to her for that. Her favor was not without its price, though. I had to join her gang and cheat many people for her."

"She forced you to do that?" Roy asked concernedly.

"When you owe people like that a favor, you can't just say no," Sannie said darkly. "I told her straight out that I wouldn't hurt anyone. I didn't want to have anything to do with *any* violence." Sannie sighed heavily. "It worked for a while. At first, she was satisfied with me winning poker tournaments for her and cheating at carnival games. She and I ... understood one another. I think she even admired me. She always said to me, 'You have an ability. A way with people. It will always be your greatest treasure.'"

Roy listened to her in silence, his jaw hanging a bit loose.

“The gold I was earning wasn’t petty but the Queen wanted more,” Sannie continued, swallowing nervously. “She wanted me to insert myself into rich people’s stagecoaches as a spy. She promised me I’d have to hurt no one. That the boys would do their job neatly with my help.

“Two people died on the first job.” Tears leaked out of Sannie’s eyes. “Boston and Hailey Martiner. I never touched the gun but I felt as though their blood was reddening my own hands. I was a part of the cause of their deaths. I see their bodies in my mind to this day.”

Sannie took in a deep breath trying to steady herself. “I made it clear to the Queen that under no circumstance would I ever rob a rich stagecoach, ever again. They were armed and ready for robbers and the horror and pain of what I saw was too much compared to the riches we ended up with.”

“What did she say to that?” Roy asked softly.

“She understood,” Sannie chuckled lightly. “She actually understood it. She understood when I wanted to leave the gang, too. She knew I couldn’t be happy in that life. It was not for me. She was the one who gave me Lady as a going away present.”

“She’s a good person,” Sannie finished.

“She’s killed hundreds of people,” Roy said shiftily. “A lot of folks got killed trying to exit her services.”

“I know that,” Sannie said firmly. “I know what she’s had to do in her position ... but she doesn’t always choose ... you know, murder. Contrary to what you hear, she tries to kill as little as possible. That’s why her empire’s still intact.”

“Kill as little as possible,” Roy mused. “There’s an ironic moral sentiment.”

“It’s really not,” Sannie said thoughtfully. “That’s what I’ve learnt these last

five years, Roy. Morals, crime, being a good person ... all these things are not as cut and dry as we might hope—or dread. There are complications and situations that arise that force people to do unthinkable things.” She looked up at Roy directly. “I robbed stagecoaches because I owed my life to a criminal. The first guy the Bandit Queen ever murdered was the man her father *sold* her to.”

“Jesus Christ,” Roy muttered, his blue eyes falling.

“Very few people are truly bad. Most are just in a bad position,” Sannie finished, fiddling with the edge of her skirt.

“What happened after you left the Bandit Queen?” Roy asked, leaning back against the wall, slipping his hands into his pockets. A crease formed between his eyebrows. “What did you do then?”

“Before I left I’d made friends with Ivan,” Sannie said, folding her hands together. “He was from Louisiana too—his parents lived

in Livingston Parish. He robbed a few too many banks there and had to run away from the state. When I met him, he wanted to stop doing major crimes. He regretted the way he left Louisiana. He wanted to change.”

“Doesn’t look like he did,” Roy mumbled.

“No, he didn’t.” Sannie’s voice was flat. “But I believed him then. I yearned for an honest life too and his words rang with me. So when I left, I asked him to come with me and he agreed. He too had wanted out of the Bandit Queen’s service for a while, but he’d been afraid to ask her. She was more than happy to have someone accompany me. She didn’t want me to get hurt. She cared for me.

“Anyway, Ivan and I left and we’ve been travelling ever since. We robbed small stagecoaches, and I ran my gambling plays in a few of the smaller towns. He would often disappear for hours—sometimes even a couple of days. He’d say he was visiting his informants. I understand a bit better now what was going on then.”

“He never asked you to come rob the banks with him?”

Sannie laughed. “Are you joking? I wouldn’t even rob the bigger stagecoaches, let alone a fully armed and prepared bank. He knew I’d never agree to it.”

Roy breathed heavily, his teeth grinding visibly. “I don’t know how to even begin to apologize to you.”

“It’s okay, Roy,” Sannie said with a shrug. “Don’t give me that look, I mean it. You... You took a call and you told a lie, nothing more. If I hadn’t followed you there I wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

“But you did! And of course you would! I should have seen it coming. It doesn’t matter how we put it. I was the reason you got shot.” His voice was tortured. “I was the reason you almost *died*. I didn’t—” He took in a deep breath, taking Sannie’s hand into his warm fingers. “I didn’t know if you were alive. I

spent five years thinking I'd killed you."

Sannie choked back her tears, squeezing his hand as hard as she could. "You couldn't kill me you chucklehead," she said with a half-smile. "Even when I was alone and in pain in that desert, I knew you were thinking about me. I knew you were on my team. All this time, Roy, I didn't know if I would find you again, but I always knew in my heart that you were there for me."

She suddenly felt Roy's large, warm hands wrap around her chin. He tilted her face up and peered into her eyes with his sapphire orbs. Sannie's insides melted at his touch, and heart was set ablaze by his forceful gaze.

"I'm here for you," he said, his chiseled jaw clenching with determination. "And I will never let go of you again."

Sannie felt her breath hitch. She reached forward and wrapped her arms around his warm, muscular body, tucking her head in the curve of his neck. Roy's arms

hugged her back tightly, one hand wrapping around the back of her head. She inhaled the scent of him, and it was maddening, dizzying.

“Never,” he whispered in her ear. “I will never let go of you.”

Sannie shut her eyes, content, for the first time in forever.





# Chapter Thirteen

## *Confrontation*

### ***Sannie***

Sannie and Roy rode back to Tom's Inn together. Sannie closed her eyes and let the whipping wind wrap itself around her, blowing her hair back. The rhythm of Lady's body underneath was soothing. A constant.

Sannie wasn't quite sure what she wanted to do, but she did know that she wanted to confront Ivan about all that she'd learnt. They'd been partners and friends for four years now. She knew she deserved that much. *One honest word. Just one.*

Telling Roy the truth about everything was the best thing she could have done for herself. She felt like he finally knew everything about her again and he loved her, not just for who she used to be, but who she'd become now. Her shoulders felt a hundred pounds lighter, her heart freer. They'd finally talked about what lay between them and it felt

so good that Sannie couldn't believe she'd waited nearly a month to get it out of the way.

When Tom's Inn appeared in their view, Sannie slowed down to match Roy's mare's pace. "Aye," she called him as she pulled on Lady reins. "I think I should go in there alone."

"I don't know, Sannie," Roy said. "That guy's dangerous."

"I've been alone with him all this time, it's okay."

"I'm not leaving you with a murderer." His tone was final.

Sannie sighed. *That's fair.* "Will you wait downstairs, then? He's not gonna talk if you're there with us, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Roy said, his dark brown hair flying about in the wind. "I'll wait in the tavern. Holler if you need anything."

“I will,” Sannie said to him with a grateful smile. It felt good to have Roy on her side. She felt safer in her heart of hearts to know that he had her back. They rode their horses into the inn’s stables and tied them up. Sannie watched how Roy mumbled loving words to Witch as he unsaddled her. She remembered the story Alfred had told her about the horse that died with Roy.

“You should keep her,” Sannie said to him as she untied her bag from the grips.

“Ya think?” Roy asked with a small smile as he rubbed the mare’s neck.

“Yeah,” she replied. “You clearly adore her.”

Roy’s smile seemed to falter a bit. “Maybe,” he said, turning away from the mare. “Let’s see.”

The inside of the tavern was rather empty. It was a Tuesday afternoon, so most

people were off at work. Only two bar dogs had come into work—they sat around with a few glasses of beer, lazily playing cards.

“Sit down in my reserved booth, tell them I’m gonna be right down,” Sannie said to Roy as she pleasantly waved at the bar dogs.

“Are you certain you want to speak with him alone?” Roy asked her concernedly.

Sannie smiled at him sweetly. “I love that you’re worried about me, but it’s the best move.”

“All right,” Roy conceded with a sigh. “Be careful. And call me if anything is ... going down.”

Sannie chuckled lightly, “Will do, Sheriff.”

Giving him another tiny smile, Sannie turned to flee up the stairs toward the first floor corridor. She marshalled the argument in

her head that she would use against Ivan. The things she wanted to say to him, that she knew he needed to hear. *It's not too late for us to get a better life. Either of us.*

As Sannie turned the corner into the corridor, she was met with the sight of an old woman, standing before a door, knocking on it lightly. Sannie frowned as she walked forward—the old woman was knocking on *Sannie's* door.

“Excuse me,” Sannie said politely. “Can I help you?”

The old woman turned around and Sannie let out a gasp. It was the last face she'd expected to see, here, in the corridor outside her hotel room. Sannie placed a hand against the wall to support herself as she peered into the kind, familiar eyes of the old, weathered woman before her.

The woman Sannie had spent weeks beside in a stagecoach before robbing at gunpoint. The woman who had a brooch of

bright red rubies, given to her by her late husband.

*Alice.*

\*\*\*

Sannie stood rooted with shock as she stared at the aged, kind face before her.

“Alice!” Sannie breathed, her eyes widening.

The old woman’s face was crumpled with fear, her greying eyebrows pulling together. She glanced around herself warily, clutching her purse close to her as though she were afraid Sannie was going to steal it.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” Sannie said to her gently, raising her hands in the air. “I promise!”

“I’m just here looking for the soothsayer, please,” Alice said in a shaky voice, taking a step away from her. “That’s all I wanted.”

“I *am* the soothsayer,” Sannie informed her.

Alice’s eyes widened. “You can’t be! You’re... You’re that thief!”

The word was like a stab in Sannie’s gut. “Yes, I am,” Sannie said, swallowing. “But I—”

“You’re conning people, then?” Alice asked, her eyes widening with anger. “Cheating them, eh? Just like you cheated me! You can’t guess the future! You’re nothing but a bunko artist!”

“Yes,” Sannie said truthfully, pulling her chin up. “I *am* conning people. I accept it. I was poorer than you could imagine, I needed food and shelter, and so I conned them. They like talking to me, they enjoy discussing their feelings with me! They *chose* to pay me this time! At least I’m no longer robbing them or taking a gun to their face! And believe it or not, in my life, that is an improvement!”



By the end of her rant, Sannie's voice had turned quite loud. She stared at Alice's surprised expression with her chest heaving up and down. Seeing a victim of her crimes standing before her, out of the blue, had rattled Sannie to her core. She felt her throat clog up for the third time today as flashes of every robbery she'd committed raced through her mind, causing her innards to twist.

"I'm sorry," Sannie whispered to the old woman, her eyes welling up. "Not just for yelling at you right now. I'm sorry for robbing your stagecoach. I'm so sorry. I frightened you and I tricked you. I stole from you. For all that, I'm sorry, Alice."

Alice watched Sannie unsurely. Her aged eyes fell down to the bright red ruby brooch that was pinned to her weathered, grey blouse. "You left my brooch behind," she said in an odd voice.

Sannie looked up at the old woman through watery eyes. "Yes..."

“Why did you do that?” Alice asked, curiosity dancing behind the wariness in her gaze.

Sannie sniffed, blinking rapidly. “I just... I know what it's like to lose someone you love. When they're gone and you're without them, everything that reminds you of them is precious. I understand that.”

Alice gave her the smallest of smiles, reluctantly. “Yes... This brooch is very special,” she said softly, fingering the rubies gently. “My husband left it for me with a lot of love in his heart, bless him. I was truly terrified when I thought it might be stolen.”

“I know you were,” Sannie whispered, feeling sick to her stomach with guilt. “I saw it in your eyes. I am so, so sorry, Alice.”

The widow frowned as she watched Sannie. She reluctantly walked forward, her palms twisting together anxiously. “Why... Why did you *do* that, Moonpie?” she asked

Sannie, her eyes darting between hers.  
“Where’s your family?”

“I have none,” Sannie said matter-of-factly. “Never have.”

“Ah,” Alice said, her eyes falling to the ground.

“I hope... I hope that you can at least *begin* to forgive me for the pain that I have caused you,” Sannie said, sniffing.

“You just took a few trinkets and a bit of gold, Moonpie. It was no great pain,” Alice said, gingerly reaching out to put one hand on Sannie’s shoulder. She gave her a surprisingly kind smile, her aging eyes crinkling at the corners. “You left me what I really wanted to keep.”

“You’re not ... angry?” Sannie asked with shock.

“No, I don't think so,” Alice said with a

shrug. “Everyone that has done bad things aren’t bad people. Some are good kids, just stuck in a terrible world.”

Sannie raised her arms and reached for the widow, hugging her tightly, tucking her head into her shoulder. “Oh!” Alice exclaimed as Sannie embraced her. Tears leaking freely out of Sannie’s eyes as she swooned under the weight of the words that Alice just used. The same words Sannie had whispered to herself night after night, trying to keep her conscience from torturing her. It was something else to hear those words from another’s lips. Alice’s compassion had filled her heart to the brim.

“There, there, Moonpie,” Alice cooed, patting Sannie’s head. “It’s gonna be all right.”

“What’s Moonpie?” Sannie cried, her voice muffled by Alice’s shoulder. “Why do you call me that?”

The old woman’s body shook as she chortled, “It’s cause your face is like a pie made from the moon. So sweet and luminous.”

Sannie chuckled in spite of herself, wiping her tears sloppily. She slowly pulled away from Alice, holding on to the old woman's hands. "Thank you so much, Alice. I... I can't tell you what it means to be..." Sannie trailed off, unable to come up with words for the gift Alice had just given her. Sannie felt lighter than air, but more grounded than the oldest tree.

"Forgiveness," Alice began, placing a hand under Sannie's chin caringly. "Forgiveness is the only way to truly heal, honey. I've lived long enough to learn that."

Sannie nodded thankfully, unable to muster up a response. For the first time, she was so overwhelmed that she was *speechless*.

"What are you doin' here, Moonpie?" Alice asked her curiously. "In this town?"

"We came to find the diamonds you told me about," Sannie told her honestly. "Victoria's diamonds."

Alice's eyes widened imperceptibly.  
“Did you find them, then?”

“Yes, I know the person that has them.”

“Dear lord,” Alice exclaimed lightly.  
“Wh- Who is it?”

“The widow, Matilda Best,” Sannie replied with a shrug. “Some rich woman who lives by the end of the creek.”

Alice winced a little as a thought occurred to her. “Are you... Are you gonna rob her?” she asked Sannie, her forehead creasing fearfully.

Sannie bit down on her lip. “I’m not gonna lie to you, Alice, I was,” she said, leaning back against the corridor wall. “But I don't think so anymore.”

Alice raised a greying eyebrow at her.  
“You don't?”

“No. I don't.” Sannie’s voice was stronger this time. “I don't wanna take anymore shortcuts. I want to live a different life. A life of honor, and honesty. I don't... I don't want to die anonymous.”

Alice eyed her carefully, her brown eyes shifting between Sannie’s. “You never told me your name.”

“Sannie.”

“Sannie,” Alice added with a small, kind smile. “I don't know you enough, but I can tell you that you have some goodness in you. It’s never too late to choose which side of yourself you want to keep—”

The door of Sannie’s room swung open with a loud thud. Ivan poked his bright blond head out of the entryway.

“Sannie, when were you gonna tell me the Pinkertons were in town?” he demanded, angrily stepping out into the corridor. His eyes

fell on the old woman beside Sannie and he scowled.

“She’s... She’s the old crone from the stagecoach...” Ivan said slowly, carefully, his lanky frame tensing up. Beside Sannie, Alice had begun to slowly position herself behind Sannie so she was further away from Ivan.

“She was on the stagecoach,” Sannie admitted to him. “But, Ivan, it’s okay—”

Ivan didn’t wait for her to finish her sentence—he suddenly reached out with his abnormally long arms and lunged for the old widow. Alice shrieked and backed away from him, her body slamming against the corridor wall. Sannie instantly jumped in between them before Ivan could charge toward Alice and grab her. She shoved him away from them with both her hands, letting his body hit the door behind him.

“Hey, what the hell, Sannie?” Ivan roared with maddening rage.



“You’re asking me?” Sannie cried.  
“What are you trying to do to her, huh?”

“The Pinkertons are in town and that woman is gonna tell them everything!” Ivan said maliciously, pointing a trembling finger at Alice who cowered behind Sannie fearfully.  
“We have to keep her here until—”

“Until *what*? Until you kill her, like you did those men in the banks your robbed?” Sannie asked, her temper rising. Alice gasped behind her. “Yeah, I know about that!” Sannie taunted him.

“Sannie, you need to shut your bloody mouth and get the hell out of my way!” Ivan yelled, moving forward threateningly.

Sannie lunged for him, shoving her elbow up Ivan’s neck, throwing him back against the door. She pulled her knife out of its hiding place under her belt and raised it swiftly, placing its tip smartly against his neck. The moment the cold metal touched Ivan’s skin, he froze, his steel grey eyes widening

with pure disbelief.

“Have you lost your damn mind?” he asked her breathily.

“If you touch her, I will kill you,” Sannie stated.

Ivan gasped, his nostrils flaring with rage. “You’re bluffing,” he spat. “You don't have the *guts*.”

Sannie pressed the tip of the blade into his skin threateningly. “Try me.”

“God dammit, Sannie she’s gettin’ away!” Ivan snarled, saliva spitting out of his mouth.

“RUN, Alice!” Sannie shouted, without taking her eyes off of Ivan.

Ivan’s eyes rolled to the corner to watch the old woman running away from them. Sannie held the knife to his neck steadily, her

gaze focused on his heaving chest, his enraged, flickering eyes and flexing fingers. When Alice's footsteps reached the staircase that led to the tavern, Ivan let out a loud howl and pushed Sannie away from him. She let herself fall back, taking her knife down readily. She let go of a deep breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"Do you realize what you just did to us?" Ivan hissed, his pale face turning red as his lip curled up. "Do you have *any* idea what kind of unholy trouble we're about to get into?"

"If you'd waited *one second* before lunging for her, you would have seen that she wasn't gonna report us!" Sannie shot back at him immediately. "She was forgiving us and you *ruined* it!"

Ivan laughed out loud maniacally, placing a hand on his forehead, "Jesus Christ, I have *had it* with your bloody do-gooder fantasy! Sandra, we are *criminals*! Cheaters, liars, hoodwinkers—we don't get *forgiven*! That tramp is running to the Pinkertons *right now* to

rat on us and it's ludicrous to me that you can't see that!"

"If she is complaining, she's gonna complain about you!" Sannie seethed. "You were the one that threatened her!"

"If you keep up this delusion that you're somehow a good person and that you'll just fit into some shite normal life one day, you're gonna get killed," Ivan spat back viciously. "I'm not waiting to get killed alongside you."

Ivan turned around and stormed into their room, his footsteps hard and angry against the floorboards. Sannie followed him warily, tucking her knife back into her belt. She watched him bend down to grab his empty bag from under his bed and toss his belongings in, one after another.

"What are you doing?" Sannie asked him nervously.

"What we came here to do," Ivan said

shortly, packing a knife and a rope into his bag. "I'm getting those diamonds and getting the hell outta here." Sannie felt a chill race down her spine when Ivan pulled his gun out from under his pillow. He opened the case to check if he had bullets and then packed the gun into his belt.

"Ivan," Sannie whispered, looking up at him sternly. "You can't hurt that lady."

"Who?" he asked, airily, as though he barely heard her.

"Mrs. Best!" Sannie cried, stepping forward. "You can't... You can't rob her right now! We don't have a plan or a layout or—"

"There is no *we*, Sannie, that much has become clear to me," Ivan said, giving her a sardonic grin. "You'd much rather stay here and play house with the sheriff. Well, guess what? I don't need ya! I'm goin' over to that mansion and gettin' the diamonds whichever way I see fit."

Sannie stared up at him rebelliously, planting her feet on the ground. "If you hurt that lady, the Pinkertons will hunt you down till they find you. They were dead serious about getting you, Ivan. If you do this now, *they will not let you get away.*"

"I've robbed fifteen banks in my life, minimum," Ivan said dismissively, hoisting his bag over his shoulder. "You really think I can't run away from the lousy Pinkertons?"

With that, Ivan strode past her without giving her so much as a second glance. His form was angry, his palms curled into fists as he tore through the main door. Just as he was about to leave, Sannie took in a deep breath and addressed him.

"You know you murdered people during those robberies!" she said loudly. "Or have you forgotten?"

Ivan ground his teeth and walked back into the room. With one arm, he slammed the front door shut behind him. The moment the

door fit in its frame with a *thunk* Ivan raced toward Sannie, so suddenly, she could barely move before his fingers wrapped themselves around her neck and the full force of his body shoved her into the wall behind.

The impact made Sannie feel like she got the wind knocked out of her—she barely managed to react in time to stop her head from hitting the wall. As Ivan strangled her with one hand, he glared into her eyes with a fury she had never seen before.

“Do you want me to get caught, Sandra?” He asked her, spit flying out of his clenched jaw. His fingers tightened around Sannie’s neck—she clawed at him with her nails. “Tell me if that’s what you want, and I’ll end you right now.”

“All those times we rode together,” Sannie choked out defiantly, struggling to draw breath. “You said you wanted a different life... You said you wanted to be better—”

“I *am* better!” Ivan cried, his eyes

widening. “I know what I need, better than others do! I can provide for myself! I can get what I need!”

“You’re a murderer!” Sannie whispered, tears leaking out of her eyes. “You would have killed Alice, too, wouldn’t you?”

Ivan’s face crumpled into a grim grin. “Probably. And I might have to kill the widow Best, too.” His fingers unfurled from around Sannie’s neck, letting her fall away from the wall. He turned away from her, brushing his jacket. “Death is a part of life, Sannie. It always has been. One day I will die, too—as anonymously as those security men that I killed. No one will know my name and no one will cry upon my death. But my life ... my life will be full. I will be free.”

“What is life if you’re dying alone?” Sannie croaked, taking in a deep, lunging breaths, eager to fill her lungs.

“I’d rather die in a castle than a gutter,” Ivan stated clearly. “Even if I have to die



alone.”

Ivan's words made Sannie's stomach curdle. She leaned over her knees, holding onto them for support. “I have no idea who you are,” she whispered to him breathily.

“I know you don't,” Ivan said, walking toward the main door, his boots loud on the wooden floors. “You never have. You dream of a farm, a home—a glorified cage. I dream of the open road, and the wind against my hat. A truly free life. You and I were never on the same page.”

“Then why don't you kill me, too?” Sannie asked him tiredly. “Why let me live with all your secrets?”

“I assume the sheriff is waiting downstairs for you, is he not?” Ivan asked, throwing her a sideways glance.

Sannie stared at him silently.

“That’s what I thought,” Ivan said with a snort. He looked away from her once more, his blonde hair falling over his eyes. “For some reason, that man looks determined to protect you.”

“He’s my friend,” Sannie said simply, staring at the floor.

“I couldn’t care less,” Ivan snapped harshly. “You chose your friend, I chose the diamonds.”

“Roy’s not going to let you hurt a citizen of his town, Ivan!” Sannie cried, straightening up with her fists balled up beside her.

“Roy can come and try whatever he wants!” Ivan said with a maniacal glare, whipping his gun out of his bag. It’s steely husk glistened in the lights of the inn threateningly. “We’ll see who wins.”

Sannie’s teeth gnashed against one another. “If you hurt him, I’m gonna tear you

apart limb from limb.”

“Then I’ll simply have to kill you, too,” Ivan said with a fake, polite grin. He yanked open the door and slipped out into the hallway outside, without wasting another breath. Sannie stared after him in shock, her heart racing in her chest.

*Whatever I may or may not have learnt today, one thing’s for sure, Sannie thought as she eyed the hallway darkly. Ivan is dangerous. He’s going to go after the widow and if she resists he’s going to use force to get his way. He knows he has no time; the Pinkertons must already be preparing to hunt him. He might even kill the widow to make his way.*

*Another death. Because of my idea to come find the diamonds, Sannie thought, breathing heavily. Her eyes widened as she looked down at her trembling hands.*

*What do I do now? Sannie wondered. What can I do? If I try to stop Ivan, he’ll most definitely kill me. I don’t even have a gun to*

*defend myself!*

Sannie looked up at the door as another idea occurred to her. *I can't fight Ivan ... but I can warn the widow! If I can get there before him, I can warn the widow about his plan! Lady is way faster than Jackal. This can WORK!*

Without missing a beat, Sannie rushed into her room and grabbed her favorite tool belt from under her mattress. In it, she fit her knife, a smaller blade, her backup piece of flint, some cotton balls, and a tiny bottle of liquor to clean wounds in an emergency. She turned and strode out of her room, quickly making her way through the corridor and down the stairs. Roy was still waiting downstairs, bobbing anxiously beside the bar.

“Hey, what happened?” he asked her as he spotted Sannie, rushing over to her hastily. “I just saw Ivan running out of here like he was being chased by wolves!”

“He’s gonna rob Matilda Best,” Sannie told Roy bluntly. *I am done keeping secrets from*

*Roy. He needs to know if I'm planning on going after a dangerous criminal myself. "He's going to do it right now."*

Roy looked back at the door that Ivan had left through, a series of invisible calculations going through his piercing blue eyes.

"Roy, he's dangerous," Sannie said in a low tone. "He really wants those diamonds and he's determined to get out. If that woman's at home, he's gonna kill her."

"She has a million guards near her house, it might not be so easy," Roy suggested.

"She adores him, Roy!" Sannie cried. "She's been inviting him over to her house every day for the last two weeks! She's *gonna* let him in."

"That is bad," Roy whistled, his eyes narrowing. "Okay, we have to go stop him. Right now."

Roy turned and raced over to the bar, waving one of the bar dogs over. He slipped him three gold coins and whispered something in his ear. The bar dog nodded vigorously before turning around and running away.

“What did you do?” Sannie asked him curiously.

“I sent a message to the jailhouse,” he said, striding toward the main door. Sannie rushed alongside him. “I have to leave for the Best mansion right away but I’m gonna need backup.”

“Will her guards let us in?” Sannie asked him as they strode out of the inn into the orange-yellow light of the approaching evening.

“They have to, I’m the sheriff. Wait, hang on,” Roy pulled to stop, slowly spinning so he looked Sannie directly in the eye. “Us? You’re not coming with me.”

“Uh, yes I am,” Sannie stated, crossing

her arms.

“It’s not debatable, Sannie. I can’t put another civilian in danger.”

“I’m not just a civilian, I’m an informant!” she protested. “I know Ivan better than you do! I can predict what he will do next and you can’t!”

“Listen, I can’t...” Roy sighed heavily. “I can’t place you in danger, Sannie. Not again. That was my greatest mistake.”

“Your greatest mistake wasn’t that you put me in danger, you chucklehead,” Sannie corrected him. “It was that you put yourself in danger *alone*. That day when I followed you, I did it because the idea of you being in danger by yourself terrified more than *anything* else. If we both had known about the plan and were on the same page, we would have escaped. Just as we have all our lives.”

“We’re better when we’re together.” Sannie finished with a warm, confident smile.

“I’m coming with and you can’t stop me.”

Roy gave her a hard, level gaze and then reached forward to press his lips against hers. It was gentle, and short, but it completely caught Sannie by surprise. Warmth exploded at the point where their lips touched, making the blood in her body rush ferociously to her cheeks. He pulled away from only a moment later, his sapphire eyes dark and full of flames, all at once.

“Better together,” Roy whispered with a tiny, crooked smile on his heartbreakingly handsome face. “I like that.”

Sannie grinned back at him, her heart swelling up. “Let’s go. We can’t let Ivan get there too long before us.”

With that, they both rushed into the stables and began to prepare their horses for the ride. As each minute passed, Sannie could feel the tension in her body building up. With every tick of the clock, Ivan was getting closer to Matilda Best. The reclusive widow rarely



ventured out and was most definitely at home. If Ivan found her in his path to the diamonds...

*He'll probably seek her out, Sannie realized with dread settling in her stomach. The fastest way to get to the diamonds is to ask the widow. He'll find her first.*

Sannie hastened her actions, saddling Lady with speedy precision. Without having to ask, Roy began to speed up too. He could sense her rising anxiety.

They rode out on their horses, throwing up dust around them as they raced into the dusky evening. The widow's house was far, all the way on the other end of the town. The passersby turned into a blur, mixing with the green hues of the land as Sannie urged Lady to go faster, leaning down on her so low that she could just barely see over her head. She knew Lady was faster than Jackal—if she pushed, she could even reach the mansion before Ivan.

*It'll be easier to protect the widow if I'm*

*there first. She glanced back at Roy through a tumble of her hair for a moment. Witch isn't fast enough. I have to reach there first.*

Sannie lightly tapped Lady's hindquarters with her hand and nudged her side with her foot, urging her to put all her might into the race. As always, Lady understood her right away, throwing the full force of her muscular legs into the ground. Sannie's body rocked wildly as she bounded across the land. She sucked in her gut as hard as she could, doing her best to maintain balance without pulling too hard on Lady's reins.

Sannie didn't need to look back to know she had left Witch behind. The thin silver glimmer of the creek had already become visible to her. It shone at the edge of the horizon with the orange, red and violet hues that spilled across the sky. In the vast distance, Sannie could see the lone figure of a horseman, kicking up a cloud of dust as he raced ahead.

*Ivan*, Sannie realized, keeping her form

steady. "Come on, baby," she murmured to Lady, holding onto her for dear life. "Let's show that two-faced crook how fast you can go!"

The jet horse flew through the prairies, a vision of precision and speed combined. Her inky black hair whipped in the crisp autumn wind, her hooves leaving deep grooves in the ground beneath. Sannie dared to turn for a short moment. She couldn't spot Witch behind her.

Sannie turned back to face the road ahead, her eyes focused on Jackal's distant figure. She'd come closer to him now and could see his beige coat and the angry welts on his hindquarters from where Ivan had struck him too hard. Anger spurred Sannie on and she charged after the horse with a near maddening rage. *It was my idea to steal those diamonds. I am not letting that woman die.*

Within a matter of a few minutes, Lady had gained on Jackal. He was charging ahead barely five yards away from Lady. Ivan turned his head and glanced behind at Sannie, his

grey eyes flattening into a deep scowl. He looked back ahead and one of his hands reached into his pocket.

Instinct took over Sannie and she veered Lady to the right, falling beside a long row of trees. She hadn't stepped to the new path for two second when she heard the *BANG BANG* of two shots being fired near her. Sannie's heart leapt to her throat as she glanced at Ivan through the trees whizzing past her. His gun waved with his hand as he bounded along the country road. He cursed loudly when he realized that Sannie had already switched her road.

*Ivan shot at me! Sannie was shocked. He actually tried to kill me!*

Lady had caught wind of the danger near them and had somehow, picked up even more speed. Nothing spurred an animal on more than the urge to live and Sannie saw that—Lady tore through the land at a speed she'd never witnessed before, bounding up and above all obstacles that came her way. The mare's vision was precise, her turns sharp and

focused. Sannie glanced beside her and no longer saw Ivan there. He wasn't ahead of her either.

She turned her head back and saw Jackal's body far behind her, getting further and further away.

"Woohoo!" she cried as she leaned back down on Lady, patting her neck. "I have never loved you more, Lady!"

The horse whinnied wildly, spurred on by Sannie's joyous cry. She bent back down on Lady, holding onto her neck strongly. She had never gone this fast before, and was actually having trouble coordinating her balance.

As Lady began to slowly tire and slow down, Sannie could look up at her surroundings. She'd left Ivan far behind and had now reached the part of the creek that began to thicken before it joined the river.

"Just a little bit more, darlin'," Sannie murmured to Lady, urging her to keep going

in spite of her obvious desire to stop by the creek for a drink.

Sannie and Lady reached the widow's house ten minutes of hard riding later. Lady was utterly exhausted by the time they got there, her eyes drooping as she panted heavily. Sannie pulled her toward a safe spot on the river bank and tied her to a nearby stump. Lady paid her no attention as Sannie untied her bags. She was too busy slurping giant sips of fresh water from the gurgling river.

"When I return, you are getting a major treat," Sannie promised her, patting her on the neck. The horse ignored her and continued to drink from the river. Sannie nodded tightly and turned away to make her way to Matilda Best's mansion.

The enormity of the mansion still stunned Sannie, even though she'd already seen the house once before. *How does she even live here all by herself?* Sannie wondered as she neared the mansion's main gate. *I'd get scared by my echoes alone in that castle.*

Sannie's eyes fell on the guard that stood at the gate and felt her heart sink. *Dammit, I didn't think this through! Will they even let me in?* Sannie glanced around herself anxiously—there were three other walking guards that accompanied the stationary one. *What will I do if they don't let me in?*

“Aye,” the guard at the gate suddenly said to Sannie, waving at her. Sannie frowned as she neared him.

“You Madame Cassandra?” the guard asked her as he chewed on a straw of hay.

“Yeah,” Sannie answered unsurely.

“Go right through here,” the guard said, opening the main gate for Sannie. “Mrs. Best is waiting for you inside.”

“She is?” Sannie asked quizzically. *How could she possibly know I was coming here?*

“Yes,” the guard said emphatically. “Please go straight down the hall and wait in the living area.”

Frowning, she followed along the path he pointed her to, having remembered it from earlier. *This shouldn't be this easy*, she thought to herself warily as she approached the porch of the enormous, Victorian mansion. The curving white edges and the fancy, carved cornices awed her once more as she strode through the open front door of the mansion.

Sannie was greeted by the warm velvety hues of the inside of the Best mansion. The enormous chandelier threw bright flecks of light across the soft, plush carpet under Sannie's feet. She walked forward with her mouth hanging loose as she admired the stunning amounts of riches surround her.

“Beautiful house, isn't it?” A voice cracked from somewhere above Sannie. She looked up to see Matilda Best standing at the top of the gigantic staircase, dressed in a poofy, violet skirt and a white vest. She walked down purposefully, a guarded



expression on her aged face.

“Mrs. Best,” Sannie said, relieved to reach her so soon. “I need to speak with you.”

“I knew you’d come here. Uninvited, unannounced,” Mrs. Best said in a scathing tone as she paused in her steps. Her chin was high as she glared down at Sannie. “To be honest, I thought it’d be sooner. The Devil usually tries harder to get in through the door.”

Sannie stared at her in pure confusion. “What?”

“I knew I’d see you here, trying to sully my house, *witch*,” Mrs. Best spat, her wrinkled cheeks turning pink. “I could’ve run away from you. I could’ve hidden. But I won’t.”

Sannie took a step away from her with a frown. *What the hell is she talking about?*

“God has not made me a meek one,”

she growled. “I can look the Devil in the eye before I destroy Him.”

Mrs. Best raised her hand in the air, brandishing a gun in her fist. Sannie froze when she saw the black, metal mouth of the gun point in her direction. The effect was immediate. Sannie’s heart began to race, sweat trickling down the side of her forehead. *Focus, Sannie, focus*, she thought to herself, eyeing the widow fearfully. *She’s carrying a revolver. It has only six shots. Remember the shots, Sannie...*

“Mrs. Best,” Sannie began carefully, raising her hands in the air. “I have no idea what you’re talking about—”

“You’re a liar and a cheat!” Mrs. Best screamed her white-blond hair flailing about wildly. “You said you were devout, that you were Christian, when in fact you’ve never set foot in a church all your life!”

*How can she possibly know that?* “Mrs. Best, that is not true—”

“Oh stop it you lying *wench*, Ivan told me everything!” Mrs. Best spat, waving her gun around maniacally. Sannie gasped. *Ivan told Mrs. Best his real name?* “He told me how you heard about my precious diamonds, *my* inheritance and you wanted to get your dirty, sinning hands on them. He told me how you tricked him with your body and your youth into coming here to rob me!”

“*What?*” Sannie was shell-shocked at the widow’s proclamations. *All this time that Ivan was coming here, this is what he was telling her?*

Mrs. Best cackled cruelly, her gun leaning slightly away from Sannie. “The hold of tramps over men is weak, however. Something that you tramps will never understand. Ivan saw in me a woman he could actually respect. A woman he could *love*.”

Sannie couldn’t help it. She burst into a fit of laughter.

“Why are you laughing?” Mrs. Best

demanded angrily, her left eye twitching. “Shut up, you crone!”

“You have got to be jesting!” Sannie cried ludicrously. “Do you *really* believe Ivan loves you?”

“Why *can’t* he love me?” the old widow yelled. “I’m smart, and lovely and—”

“And old enough to be his grandmother!” Sannie snapped back, placing her hands on her hips. “He’s only making you think he cares for you for those diamonds! You have no idea how—”

The widow began to raise her gun in the air and instinct took over Sannie, making her jump out of the way and roll behind a nearby pillar. A fraction of a second later, a bullet tore through the same spot Sannie had been standing in.

“Holy hell, Mrs. Best!” Sannie cried as she crouched behind the pillar, breathing hard.

“Do *not* use your vile curses in my house, you witch!” Mrs. Best screamed back.

Sannie closed her eyes for a second, trying to pull her thoughts together. *Jesus, this woman’s crazy! She spent one bullet. Five left to go.*

“Do you think I’m joking here? *Madame Cassandra?*” Mrs. Best cried her name mockingly. “Do you really think I’m gonna let you poison me with your lies so you can get your hands on my diamonds?”

“I didn’t come here for your diamonds!” Sannie yelled back as she hid behind the pillar, glancing over her shoulder nervously. “I came because *Ivan* is coming for the diamonds! He’s gonna kill you to keep them for himself!”

“*LIES!*” Mrs. Best roared, firing her gun in the air.

*Two*, Sannie counted.

“The Devil whispers lies in your ears to make you sin!”

“You know, repeatedly calling me the Devil doesn’t make everything I’m saying a lie —” Sannie jumped when another bullet shot the pillar she was standing behind. *Jesus Christ! That’s three!*

“Did you really think I’d let you take my diamonds away from me?” Mrs. Best’s voice was venomous. “I earned those riches every time I went to bed with my bastard of a husband! Each night I pretended not to smell his mistress’ perfumes! I earned it all those years that I watched and groomed his house! I earned it when I smothered him to death with a pillow!”

Sannie gasped, leaning back against the ivory pillar. “Oh my God, you actually *did* it. You killed your own husband? I thought those were just rumors!”

“I did what I had to do to keep what

was mine!” the widow cried as she tried to get an angle on Sannie. “That loon was about to change his will and leave all the diamonds for his daughter! From a previous *wife*! How *dare* he try to take what was mine? He was a pile of chickenshit! No! It’s good riddance! I’m gonna marry Ivan and we’re gonna live together with all our riches. I will have *his* beautiful babies!”

The mental image nearly made Sannie gag. She could hear Mrs. Best’s footsteps coming from her right hand side now. Sannie knew she had to switch pillars soon or she’d be within shooting sight of the widow. Perking up her ears, Sannie threw a cursory glance to her right. She watched Mrs. Best’s shadow with a single minded focus. The moment she felt the timing was right, she lunged away from her pillar and rolled across the ground, stopping right behind the next one.

Two shots fired after Sannie as she rolled behind the second pillar. One of the bullets whizzed by so close to Sannie’s foot that she almost felt the change in the air as it passed by. As Sannie leaned back on the pillar, breathing heavily, she counted in her mind. *That’s five! One more bullet left.*

“Come out, come out, *Madame!*” Mrs. Best called mockingly. “A witch of your competence shouldn't be afraid of a puny human like me!”

“Mrs. Best, I am *not* a witch!” Sannie yelled, fed up with the religious crackpottery. “Ivan and I robbed a stagecoach together that was filled with mail! Mail written for the people living in Little Rosa! That’s how I knew all their secrets!”

“Lies!” the widow protested.

“I read the letter your sister wrote to you!” Sannie shouted back. “She mentioned your husband’s sister, Harriet. Her children Chaz and Bitsy.”

“How do I know you’re not just using your powers to guess those names and trying to trick me?”

“For cryin’ out loud, Mrs. Best, there are no such things as witches!” Sannie



screamed. "I'm on *your* bloody side! I'm telling you, if Ivan gets here, he will take the diamonds and leave you behind, dead or alive!"

"I- I don't buy it!" The widow's tone sounded shaky with doubt.

Suddenly, the sounds of rapidly falling footsteps reached Sannie's ears. She glanced over her shoulder to see Ivan's blonde head racing into the mansion through the foyer.

*Dear God, no, Sannie thought, pressing her head against the pillar. How can I escape from the both of them? This is impossible!*

"Ivan!" Mrs. Best cried. "You're here!"

*Where are you, Roy?* Sannie wondered, breathing heavily.

"Where is she?" Ivan demanded loudly. "Where's Sannie? She's here, isn't she?"

“She’s hiding behind that pillar over there,” Mrs. Best replied.

“Great, she won’t be a problem for long.” The sound of a gun being cocked reached Sannie’s ears. She closed her eyes, her heart thumping loudly. “You have the diamonds with you?” Ivan asked the widow.

Mrs. Best seemed to pause. “I haven’t fetched them from the vault yet.”

“Well, what’re you waiting for?” Ivan asked impatiently. “The sheriff was on my heels! Go get them, come on!”

“Don’t you order me around!” Sannie heard the widow snap. “Those diamonds are still *mine*.”

“Of course, of course, darlin’.” Ivan’s voice softened as he identified the widow’s temper. “Come on, let’s kill the witch and be on our way. Far away from here. Let’s find someplace quiet and beautiful where we can use those diamonds to start a new life.”

There was a pause without so much as a stir. The beating of Sannie's heart was the loudest thing she could hear.

"Matilda, *what* are you waiting for?" Ivan sounded irritated now.

"Tell me," the widow began flatly. "If I didn't have those diamonds. If it was just me and this house, would you still chose me over her?"

"Matilda, come on—" Ivan started.

"Answer the question," the widow snapped. "Now."

"Matilda..." Ivan's suddenly sounded very wary. "Please, put the gun down."

*Put the gun down?* Sannie resisted the urge to jump out and see what was happening. *What the hell is going on back there?*

“The Madame said she knew things about me because you both read our stolen mail,” Mrs. Best said in harsh tones. “Is that true?”

“Matilda, would I lie to you?” Ivan asked.

“That is not an answer to my *question!*”

“Of course that’s not true!” Ivan cried, sounding alarmed. “She’s lyin’ to you! She is the Devil incarnate, do not fall into her web, my love!”

*Jesus Christ, Ivan,* Sannie thought to herself. “He’s lying, Mrs. Best!” she yelled loudly.

“Shut up, Sannie!” Ivan shouted.

“He’ll kill you the minute you show him where the diamonds are!” Sannie continued.

“Shut your lyin’ mouth, you wretched

crone!” Ivan roared.

“Both of you, SHUT UP!” the widow screamed. “They’re *my* diamonds. *Mine*, you hear me?”

“They’re yours, dear, I have always known and accepted that,” Ivan said in an oily tone. “It’s *me*. I would never betray you.”

There was another pause. “Come on, Matilda,” Ivan cooed. “Just tell me where the diamonds are.”

There was a loud *BANG* and the next second, Ivan’s painfully loud howls filled the mansion. Sannie leapt up from her seat on the floor, her back flush against the pillar. *Did she shoot him?*

“W- WHAT THE HELL MATILDA!” Ivan roared.

“TELL ME WHERE THE DIAMONDS ARE?” the widow shrieked. “*TELL ME WHERE*

*THE DIAMONDS ARE?* All you men are the same! Greedy, lying, sinning pieces of—”

*That was six, Sannie realized. That was the last shot.*

Without wasting a second, she broke into a run, spinning around the pillar and charging straight toward the widow's trembling form. Ivan was screaming, rolling around on the floor with his hand clenching his bleeding stomach. The widow stood over him, her entire form rising and falling as she tried to get breath into her aging body. Her beady eyes looked up in Sannie's direction and widened with fear. Sannie scrunched up her face and tackled the widow with all her might, bringing her wrinkly old form tumbling down to the ground.

The bullet-less metal husk of her gun fell to one side with a clang.

The widow was quicker than she looked, and instantly dug her hands into Sannie's hair, yanking at them with all the

might her body could muster. Sannie raised her fist high in the air and brought it down to Mrs. Best's face with a fury. The punch landed with a solid crunch, making dark red blood stream down the widow's face.

Mrs. Best screamed and raised her head to bite Sannie right in the arm. Sannie yelled and tried to roll away from her, but the widow refused to let go, rolling on top of her with her teeth glued to Sannie's skin. Sannie thrashed and wriggled as she tried to get her hand away from her. She cried out loud as the bony teeth of the widow broke through her skin. Behind their scuffle, Ivan was rising from the floor, holding his stomach with one hand, taking deep, heaving breaths.

Sannie pulled her head back and then brought it forward with as much force as she could muster, butting heads with Mrs. Best. The blow knocked the widow away and she rolled from Sannie for a fraction of a second. It was enough for Sannie to lunge back on top of her and land a tight slap right across her ancient cheek.

The widow reached up to the center table behind them and grabbed hold of the wooden tray that sat on the glass. She chucked the tray directly at Sannie's head with a deranged snarl. Sannie cried out loud as the corner of the tray hit her head, causing blood to instantly start dripping down into her eye. The widow grabbed a hold of Sannie's collar and pulled her back down, landing a formidable punch against her chin.

Behind the widow, Sannie could see that Ivan had stood up. His face held the darkest, most deadened expression she'd ever seen in her life. He pulled out his gun and slowly aimed it at the two women scuffling on the ground. Sannie felt her eyes go wide with fear. She knew he didn't care who he shot now. He was a killer, an animal.

Suddenly, the door behind Ivan flew open, its gilded halves flying in opposite directions. Roy charged through the doors as fast as his feet would take him and landed a flying kick right across Ivan's head. Ivan was knocked off his feet instantly. He extended his hands to break his fall and he landed with a terrifying crunch.



Ivan's next howl was so loud that it pierced through Sannie's skin. *Good heavens, he broke his arm!* Sannie realized with horror as she saw Ivan's forearm fold at the grossest angle. He let out a banshee-like cry that raised the hair on Sannie's neck. The widow was distracted by the scream, too, and paused between landing punches to see what was going on behind her. Sannie didn't miss the widow. She raised her fist and punched the widow right across her chin, pushing her away. Instead of resisting, the widow began to crawl away from her, much to Sannie's confusion. She trailed her eyes along the widow's path and gasped. Ivan had dropped his gun after he broke his arm and the widow was making her way toward it as fast as possible.

Sannie lunged forward but she knew that she would be too late. The widow reached forward and curled her aged fingers around the grip of the gun. At that instant, however, a heavy boot landed on the gun, decisively keeping it pressed to the ground. Sannie looked up to see Roy's hulking, muscular form towering over the widow, with his foot on the

gun. His icy blue eyes stared down at them through a fringe of dark brown hair.

“I suggest you step away from the gun and put your hands in the air, Mrs. Best,” Roy growled as he glared at the widow.

Mrs. Best curled her lip in disgust as she surveyed him, her hand still stuck to the gun.

“Don't make me force you,” Roy threatened calmly, his brilliant blue eyes shouldering. “Because I will.”

With a fearsome snarl of defeat, the widow pulled her hand away from the gun, lying down on the floor on her back. She scrunched up her face and began to sob, tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes. Roy bent down to pick up the gun from the floor. He glanced at Sannie worriedly. “Are you okay?” he asked her.

“Yeah, yeah, I'm all right,” Sannie replied, wiping the blood out of her eyes. “Thanks to you.”

“Come here,” Roy said, reaching out to her with his palm. Sannie wrapped her fingers around his warm hand and pulled herself up. A stab of pain raced across her torso along with another sharp pang that emanated from her forehead. It made her dizzy. She placed her arm against Roy’s to steady herself.

“We need to take you to the physician,” Roy said anxiously, moving so he was closer to her. He pulled a white kerchief out of his pocket and pressed it to Sannie’s head softly. She winced as the fabric touched the wound. “I’m really glad I got here in time,” Roy whispered.

“You’re telling me?” Sannie asked him with a soft smile, looking up at him through her bloodied lashes. “I was a dead one without you.”

“Better together,” Roy recited, his blue eyes glowing.

Sannie couldn't help but smile. “Better

together,” she confirmed, leaning forward to gently press her lips against his cheek.

“Ah, *there* it is!” Ivan’s bitter voice boomed from behind them. Sannie turned to see him lying on the floor, crumpled up with his broken arm cradled close to him. He was bleeding quite a bit from his torso, dark red liquid seeping into the beige carpet and staining it. “You slept with the sheriff, didn’t ya?”

Sannie felt her jaw clench. “*Excuse me?*”

“This is why you went against me,” Ivan said, letting out a maniacal, bark-like laugh. “All these years we ran together, you were on my side. And then suddenly, you *changed!*” Ivan’s gray eyes were wide with anger. “Why? Because of the bloody sheriff!”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Sannie snapped back at him.

“Oh, am I?” Ivan sounded mad. “You

think I don't know you? You think I don't see the way you work? The moment you found someone better—someone that could get you your blasted city life—you ditched me!”

Sannie stared at him, aghast, as he continued to rant, blood-colored spittle flying out of his mouth.

“You have no sense of loyalty. A mere tramp. Well, guess what, Sheriff?” he asked wildly, glaring at Roy. “You’re going after a cheater. This woman is neither a soothsayer, nor a witch, nor a lover. She’s just a *liar*.”

“And a damn good one,” Roy snapped back, causing Ivan’s eyes to narrow. Roy walked up to him and grabbed Ivan by the collar. The blonde man let out a sharp yell as the motion moved his arm, but Roy continued to drag him toward the massive staircase that stood before them.

“You don't know anything about her, Sheriff,” Ivan panted loudly. Beside him, the widow was balled up on the ground with her

palms covering her face. “She’s just using you to stay out of jail,” he said. “The moment she’s done using you, she’ll be gone.”

“I know her better than you can ever hope to,” Roy stated as he pulled his handcuffs off of his belt and made his way toward Ivan.

“No you don't,” Ivan insisted, flinching as Roy neared him. “She makes you think you know her and then she tricks you! That is her way! I’ve travelled with her for years, and you can trust me when I say—”

Roy crouched down so his face was level with Ivan. Ivan stopped talking instantly, leaning away from him fearfully. Roy was infuriated, his jaw clenched tight, his teeth grinding close together. “She was my best friend first, and your travelling buddy later,” he seethed. “Always remember that.”

Sannie felt a warm smile widen her lips and hissed as pain stung her sensitive, swollen skin.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Roy asked her, turning away from Ivan to glance at her.

“The widow got my lip,” Sannie said, lightly, eyeing Mrs. Best rolling around on the ground as she lightly tapped her bruised lip.

Roy walked over to the widow and yanked at her wrist, asking her to move. The widow refused, staying still on the ground in defiance. Rolling his eyes, Roy pulled at her body, slowly dragging her closer to the staircase. The widow swiped at him with her arm and struggled a bit, but Roy quickly pinned her arms behind her back to stop her. Then, he handcuffed her wrist to the railing just like Ivan’s.

Meanwhile, Ivan was writhing with rage, unable to stand the fact that none of his words had had any effect on the Sheriff. He glanced furtively between Sannie and Roy, his steely eyes narrowed.

“If I’m going to jail, you’re coming with me, Sannie,” Ivan hissed, sweat dripping down

his nose and onto his lap. "I'm gonna testify against ya. I'm gonna tell the Pinkertons everything. I'm gonna tell them about every robbery, every steal you ever made! If you think I'll let you screw me and walk away with your freedom, you've got another thing coming!"

Sannie's heart dropped down to her stomach at his words. She hadn't considered the fact that Ivan would also testify if he got caught. A sinking feeling weighed heavily on Sannie, making her chest constrict. Roy looked up at her with dread slowly dawning on his face.

"Did you really think you could toss me into prison and walk away free?" Ivan asked, spitting out a bit of blood that had collected in his mouth. "You've robbed as many stagecoaches as I! I'm gonna tell them robbing the banks was your idea! That you were the mastermind and I, a *puppet*!"

"No one will believe you, Ivan!" Sannie cried angrily, balling her fists. "I was not seen robbing a single bank. You have *no* proof!"



“But you were seen robbing that St. Louis stagecoach, weren’t you?” Ivan asked with a maniacal laugh. “Once the old bat from the stagecoach testifies and I testify, you’re going in the slammer, Sannie. From there, it’s only a matter of who lies better.”

Sannie looked at Roy with horror on her face. She hadn’t accounted for this in her plans. She hadn’t realized that stopping Ivan could also mean putting an end to her own freedom.

Roy looked equally alarmed. He jumped up to his feet and rushed over to her side. “I know this sounds bad,” he began.

“*Yeah*, it’s bad, it’s really bad!” Sannie hissed. The wound on her head was making her dizzy. Sannie felt the widow’s ornate foyer tilt in her vision. She placed a hand against the wall to steady herself.

“You’re concussed,” Roy noted as he stared at her. “We need to get you to a

physician.”

“Roy, if Ivan testifies,” Sannie began in a hushed whisper, “am I gonna go to jail? Be honest.”

Roy sighed heavily, forcefully letting out a puff of air. “I don't know, Sannie,” he replied heavily. “I can tell the Agents how you helped us catch Kidd Jack. How you were the one who helped us get him, so you should get some kind of pardon.”

“You think they'll let me walk for helping them catch Ivan?” Sannie asked hopefully.

“I... I don't know,” Roy replied unsurely. Sannie's face fell as she stared at his pained expression. “It's not my call to make, but I've never seen a seasoned robber get a totally clean chit unless they helped the Agents with a lot of new information.”

“What if I gave them all the stolen mail back?” Sannie asked him. “I could tell them

Ivan's hiding spots in the desert, he had several of those—"

Roy was shaking his head. "If a civilian has testified against you and said that you robbed them, I don't think this will work."

"So, if the woman from the St. Louis stagecoach has already testified, then..." Sannie trailed off, staring at Roy with bated breath.

"Then..." Roy sighed. "You'll have to be in jail for at least a few months. Minimum."

Sannie took a step back, feeling the tempo of her heart rise. *I can't go to jail!* She thought to herself as she searched the room helplessly for some kind of way out. *I spent all my life running from jail and succeeded. Now, when I finally want to stop all wrongdoing, there's no way to be free?*

"You're gonna rot in that cell with me, Sandra!" Ivan hollered mockingly. "I'm not letting you go that easy!"

Panic, acute and terrifying, seized Sannie's innards, making them twist and turn in the most unpleasant ways. She tried to take in a deep breath but her chest felt constricted and tight. She felt hungry for air, but her lungs refused to cooperate.

"Sannie, are you okay?" Roy asked, grabbing a hold of her arm. His handsome visage was blurring before Sannie's eyes. *Are my only options to be in jail or to run away again? Trick more people, rob more stagecoaches? God!* Sannie clutched at her chest, hot tears leaking out of her eyes.

"I don't want to go to prison," she whispered to Roy whose face crumpled with agony.

"I'll talk to the agent," he said. "I'll try to reduce your sentence."

Sannie was shaking her head. It didn't matter what Roy said. He was just trying to pacify her. "And how are you going to do

that? Hmm? How will you speak to the agent for me without putting your own job in jeopardy?”

“I’ll figure out a way!” Roy implored, his sapphire eyes digging into hers.

“There is no way!” Sannie protested. “You’re the sheriff, you’re not above the law! You’ll only drag yourself down trying to help me!”

“I will still try!” Roy insisted. “A few months in jail is better than years! We can figure this out, Sannie!”

Sannie shook her head, wiping her bleary eyes with her sleeve. *This is not happening. I’m not letting myself be locked up. There has to be some way to get out of this, some kind of—*

Sannie froze as her eyes landed on the mantle that stood on the other end of the room. Large and ornate, it was the same ivory marble that made the pillars that Sannie had

hidden behind. There was an object on its smooth surface that had caught Sannie's attention. Pulling her arm out of Roy's grasp, she slowly walked over to the mantle, eyeing it carefully.

"What's happening?" Roy asked her. Sannie ignored him, her eyes trained on the personal items crowded on the mantle.

The mantle had three statues of some kind of fish, and a few photo frames of people Sannie couldn't recognize. There was also a small figurine of a horse, a camel and a few robed people hunched over their canes. Behind these statues and frames sat a large metallic-looking urn.

"You have an urn," Sannie spoke suddenly, much to everyone's surprise.

She turned to face the widow, Matilda Best, who narrowed her beady, swollen eyes at her threateningly.

"You have an urn," she repeated,

pointing at the metallic object sitting on the mantle.

“I have a dead husband, that’s where I keep his ashes,” the widow snapped. “Or are you too stupid to guess that?”

“Why would you have a mausoleum built for your dead husband in your backyard, and also keep his ashes in an urn?” Sannie asked her, crossing her arms against her chest.

The widow’s face twitched uneasily, but she stayed silent. Sannie’s mind calculated fervently, her eyes shifting between the widow and the urn. *Why wouldn’t she just tell me the reason for why she has an urn? Why lie? Why stay silent? What could she possibly be hiding?*

The answer came to Sannie in one swell swoop. *The diamonds! She’s hiding the diamonds! Either in the urn or the mausoleum!* Sannie turned to the urn with excitement speeding up the tempo of her heart. *Of course! If her mansion is robbed, the robbers will first loot the safe! The last thing they would check is the*

*mausoleum or some urn lying in an open corner!*

Sannie reached out and grabbed the urn, holding its cold, metallic body between her fingers.

“Hey, stop that!” the widow screamed from behind. “Do not touch that, you witch! That is *mine!*”

“Sannie, what are you doing?” Roy asked her earnestly.

“I think I know where her diamonds are,” Sannie breathed, twisting the cap of the urn open. The widow screamed from the other end of the room, her face contorting in a hideous grimace.

“Stop her! *Stop her, Sheriff!*” she howled madly. Roy looked alarmed, his vision bouncing between Mrs. Best and the urn. “You’re the sheriff! You have to stop this!”

Sannie peeked into the urn and saw



only dust and ash sitting inside. She glanced back at the widow. Something about her reaction made Sannie feel like ash wasn't all there was in this urn. Keeping her eyes trained on the widow's face, Sannie turned the urn so that all the ash and dust tumbled out onto the floor.

“AH!” the widow howled, tears of anger pooling in her eyes and spilling over.

“Sannie!” Roy cried, grimacing. “That’s a dead guy!”

Sannie reached into the urn with her fingers and pushed at the bottom of the urn. As she suspected, the bottom of the urn wasn’t fixed. It budged under pressure and gave way after some more, revealing a small, hidden compartment inside. Sannie hastily pulled out the bottom and pulled Roy closer so he could see the contents inside.

“Look,” she whispered as they eyed the dark blue velvet pouch that sat inside the urn’s metallic walls. Sannie reached in with her

fingers and gently pulled the bag up. Its neck was slightly loose, causing two small, glittery stones to tumble out.

Both Sannie and Roy gasped at once.

*Diamonds!* Sannie's heart thudded as she pulled the pouch out of the urn and into her palm. Roy reached into the urn to pull out the two diamonds that had fallen in there, letting them roll around in his palm. Sannie loosened the pouch further and peeked inside.

"Jesus Christ!" she swore, her jaw dropping at the sight of hundreds of tiny, shimmering stones, nestled inside the pouch.

"Dear God in heaven," Roy mumbled as he stared into the pouch, his eyes widening with shock. "They're real."

"Victoria's diamonds," Sannie breathed, her voice colored with shock and awe.

"I can't believe this," Roy said. "You

actually found them.”

“Sannie!” Ivan cried from across the hall. Sannie looked up from the diamonds to see Ivan stretching his neck to stare at her, his gray eyes wide in his abnormally pale face.

“Give me a few of those diamonds—just ten—and let me go!” he cried hoarsely. “Let me go and I’ll never reveal your crimes! I promise you, I won’t say a word!”

Sannie glanced down at the diamonds and then back. *Ten diamonds is nothing. There’s easily two hundred of these in here!*

“Please, Sannie!” Ivan cried, his blonde hair slick with sweat. “We can both go free or we can both be caged!”

“I hope you’re not honestly considering this,” Roy said to Sannie from beside her.

Sannie turned her eyes down to her shoes. “Is it such a bad idea?” she asked.

“Yes,” Roy said sternly, his eyes wrinkling at the corners. “The Agents are not gonna let Ivan go, Sannie. They’re *gonna* hunt him down. How can you be sure he won’t rat you out then?”

“If you give him my diamonds, I’ll slash you!” Mrs. Best yelled, struggling against her handcuffs. Her greying hair was coming out of its pins, splaying across her aged face.

“Then you have *her*,” Roy continued, eyeing the widow darkly. “She’s gonna tell the agents everything, too. Then they’ll know you helped Kidd Jack escape.”

Sannie exhaled forcefully, her eyes dancing between Ivan, Roy and the widow. As each second passed, the Pinkertons were coming closer. Soon they would be here and there would be no escape.

*Unless... Unless I commit one last crime,* Sannie thought to herself, chewing on her bottom lip. *If Roy and I take the diamonds and*

*flee... we could reach somewhere we can be safe!*

She looked up at Roy through her lashes and reached for his sleeve, tugging him closer. Roy stared down at her with curiosity and worry in his heartbreakingly beautiful eyes.

“There is another option,” Sannie began fiercely. “We could take the diamonds and run away.”

Roy’s mouth fell slightly open but he didn’t respond to Sannie. Slowly, his eyes left hers and travelled down to the floor.

“Imagine it for a second, Roy,” Sannie urged him. “You and I, with these priceless diamonds, finally somewhere where we are both safe. Where no one is hunting us. We could live that life! We could go *right now!*”

Roy shook his head slightly. “Sannie, it’s not that simple.”

“But it *is*,” Sannie said firmly, pulling up his chin, demanding that he look her in the eyes. “All the time we were together, we dreamed of having riches like this to run away with. Riches that could get us to a new state, or to the coast! Riches with which we could get on a ship and sail away from America!”

“We can't leave the country!” Roy cried. “Where would we even go?”

“We could go to England,” Sannie offered with a shrug. “I'm sure there's all kinds of places beyond the ocean for us to go after. The point is—”

“The point is that you want to be on the run again,” Roy interrupted, his forehead creasing. “You want to be a fugitive again.”

“What other choice do I have?” Sannie demanded, brushing a strand of her hair back. She winced when her finger struck the wound on her forehead. “What else am I supposed to do? Turn myself in?”

“It’s only a few months in a cell,” Roy began.

“That’s easy for you to say!” Sannie snapped. “You’re not gonna be in it! I am!”

“You think it won’t kill me every second that I’m away from you?” he asked, anger coloring his cheeks.

“Roy, just think about this for a moment,” Sannie pled, urging him to pay attention. “With this much wealth we could buy a bloody mansion! In another bloody country! We would never have to face another hard day again in our whole lives! Isn’t that worth it?”

“What if you get caught running away with the diamonds?” Roy asked, raising a dark brown brow. “The widow’s gonna tell the agents that you stole them, so they’ll definitely come after you. You’re robbing hundreds of expensive gems—what if you get a bounty placed on your head? You can’t use the diamonds if you’re *dead*, Sannie!”

“We’ll be careful, we’ll manage to get out!” Sannie cried, raising her hands in the air. “Roy, you and I can do *anything*, I *know* that now! If we just manage to get somewhere safe, where they can’t touch us—”

“No.” The finality in Roy’s voice stopped Sannie’s words in their tracks.

“No?” she asked faintly.

“No,” he repeatedly sternly. “I do not want to be on the run again. Ever.” He let out a forceful breath. “I caught ten different troops of jewelry thieves in my time as sheriff. Did I ever tell you that?” Roy sniffed angrily. “They were big ticket robbers, too; they’d already stolen from multiple cities before coming to Little Rosa. But that didn’t *matter*. How smart they were *didn’t matter*.”

“When you’re a thief and a criminal, you have to get lucky every time, Sannie,” Roy stated clearly. “The people you’re cheating have to get lucky *once*.”



Sannie stared at him in silence.

Roy continued to speak in hushed tones. “There’s the agents here, there’s the sheriffs of the twenty towns that lie between here and the coastline, stuffed with more agents travelling in between. You really want to run through all of them? You really want to watch your step and look over your shoulder all the bloody time?”

“Roy, I can’t just volunteer to go to jail,” Sannie said with a helpless shrug.

“And I can’t live as a fugitive,” Roy stated, his jaw clenching. “The day I watched that bullet hit you, I learned my lesson, Sannie. Not another crime, *no matter what*—that’s what I was chanting in my head as I almost died searching for you. One leads to another and then another. Only pain and madness lie that way.”

Sannie felt hot tears sliding down her cheeks. “I can’t give up my freedom, Roy,” she

said in a thick voice. “It means more to me than my breath.”

“I can’t be a fugitive with you,” Roy replied, sadness turning his voice leaden. “I can’t watch you descend into a life of pain. I just can’t do it.”

Sannie bit her trembling bottom lip that threatened to let her sobs loose. “Roy...” Her voice cracked on the way out. “Don’t make me leave you.”

“Then *don’t* leave me,” Roy said, grabbing her shoulders with his large, warm hands. He looked deeply into her eyes, his vibrant blue irises shining with pain and warmth. “Stay here. Stay with me. We’ll figure something out.”

“I can’t, Roy,” Sannie said, shaking her head “With Alice’s portrait and Ivan’s testimony, there’s no way I’m not getting charged—”

“You helped them catch Ivan, they

could reduce your sentence,” Roy urged her, his breath hot before her face. “A few months is nothing, Sannie, we’ve waited *five years!*”

“I just *can’t* sign up for a life behind bars when there’s a way out right before me!” Sannie cried.

Roy hung his head, his gorgeous face crumpling as his brilliant blue eyes clouded with tears. Slowly, his hands unwrapped themselves from around Sannie’s shoulders, leaving her feeling colder and weaker. He pulled his hat down low, letting his thick, dark hair shield his eyes from her.

“If you try to steal the diamonds,” Roy said in a flat, rough tone. “I will be forced to stop you.”

Sannie’s breath hitched, sobs blocking the words in her throat. “Roy...”

His shoulders fell up and down heavily, as though it took him effort to breathe. “I will be forced to do my job, Sannie. So please ...

don't make me do that.”

Sannie could physically feel her heart breaking. The pain of it was visceral. *I can't lose him. Not again!*

“Roy,” she said faintly, unable to muster up a full sentence. She took a step closer to him and then paused.

“The Pinkertons will be here at any moment,” he said, turning his back to her. His tall figure looked regal in Mrs. Best's stately interiors. Sannie tried desperately to burn the image of him into her mind. “You can still leave the diamonds now and I won't charge you for stealing them.”

Sannie tried to swallow the lump that had lodged itself in her throat, but she couldn't get rid of it. Roy refused to turn back to her. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch his back. Her arms longed to wrap themselves around him.

“Roy,” she whispered, tears leaking out

of her eyes.

“It is my *duty* to stop you,” Roy said in a low, gravelly whisper. “So please, Sannie. Don't take the diamonds.”

Sannie hovered behind him, unable to reach out to him and unable to let go. Her fingers squished the bag of diamonds between them, letting the edges of the exquisite stones dig into her skin. Behind her, the *tick tock* of the ornate grandfather clock rang like a morbid alarm. The Pinkertons were getting closer every second. And with them, came certain imprisonment.

Steeling her heart, Sannie spun on her heels and turned away from Roy, lifting her skirt with one hand so as to not trip on the broken, fallen items strewn across the mansion's floor.

“SANNIE, NO!” Ivan roared, struggling against his cuffs viciously. “Take me with you!”

“Stop her!” the widow Best screamed from beside him, glaring at Sannie with pure hatred burning in her beady eyes. “She’s taking my diamonds! *Stop that witch!*”

Sannie glanced back for only a second. Roy had turned back to her, his illuminating, blue eyes staring at her with great pain in their depths. Sannie hesitated—she couldn’t help it. Scrunching his face, Roy jumped over a fallen table and began to race toward her. With a pained grimace, Sannie turned back to the door that led to the hallway beyond. Her fingers curled around the ornately carved doorknob of the foyer door, and she yanked at its heavy, wooden body. She slipped out into the golden, glimmering hallway outside.

As Sannie flew through the hallway, she heard the sound of the door opening behind her and turned back, pausing in her steps. Roy had entered the hallway and shut the door behind him. He wasn’t moving, however. He stood watching her quietly, his eyes hidden by his thick, dark hair.

“You’re not gonna chase after me?”

Sannie asked him breathily, her heart pounding loudly in her chest.

“Of course not,” Roy replied in a muffled, gritty voice. Sannie wished she could see into his eyes so she could know what he was thinking. “I could never arrest you, Sannie,” he continued, turning his back to her. “I just had to make sure Ivan and the widow didn’t think I just let you go.”

Sannie’s heart swelled with gratitude. “Thank you,” she said. “Roy, I—”

“The Pinkertons are gonna be here at any moment,” he said, without turning back.

*I can’t bear that he won’t meet my eyes!*  
she thought desperately to herself.

“If you must go, go now.”

“Roy, look at me,” she said firmly.

“I cannot watch you leave, Sannie,” he

said harshly, raising his head. "If the Pinkertons get here I cannot stop them for arresting you. So just go."

*The one person I love most in this world, and he can't bear to look at me, Sannie thought, tears flooding her eyes. How can this be?*

Sannie turned and sprinted over to the main door of the Best mansion. This door was large, but it opened more easily, giving way to Sannie's push to reveal the bright light outside. Sannie turned back to glance at Roy, one final time.

He stood with his back resolutely aimed at the door. If he got any indication that she was nearly gone, he didn't show it.

*Meant to be together ... yet never meant to be.*

Sannie opened her mouth to call out to him but decided against it at the last second. Taking a deep breath, she slipped out of the heavy door, into the patio outside, shutting it



behind her with a definitive thud.

Sannie hastened out of the Bests' mansion in what seemed like a blur. Lady was waiting by the spot near the river where Sannie had left her, happily chewing on grass and drinking sips of cool, fresh water. When the mare smelled Sannie, she seemed to sense her owner's broken mental and physical state. She instantly left the grass she was munching on to trot up to Sannie, whinnying lightly through her nose. Sannie reached up to touch the side of her face, fresh tears rolling down her own.

*I can't believe we're going separate ways,* she thought to herself, wiping her cheeks with her sleeve. *I can't believe I'm leaving Roy. Again!*

Lady snorted into her hair, curious about Sannie's obvious distress. Sannie gave her a light kiss and then proceeded to mounting her. Once she was seated on the horse, Sannie took the pouch of diamonds in her hands to see it once more.

It seemed like the most ordinary thing now. Just a bag with a bunch of rocks in it. A bunch of rocks that could buy an entire town, but a bunch of rocks nonetheless.

Sannie tugged at the string of the pouch till it shut tightly and then knotted the strings together to make sure no stones would come out. She tucked the pouch into her trusted leather bag that hung by the grips on the saddle. Once the pouch was safely tucked away, Sannie rose up to look at the mansion.

*I'm really doing this*, Sannie thought to herself, tears welling up in her eyes once more. *I'm really leaving him. And this time, by choice.*

Sannie looked away, to the edge of the horizon that led back to the main town and spotted a row of horsemen in the far, far distance. Caution twisted in Sannie gut. *That's a tight group. It's got to be the Pinkertons*, Sannie realized, feeling a spike of fear in her abdomen.

Sannie lightly kicked Lady's underside and the mare began to trot away from the mansion. Sannie didn't look back at it again.



# Chapter Fourteen

## *The Last Shortcut*

### ***Sannie***

Sannie rode back to the inn in a hurry. She needed to pack her things before she could take off from town. For a moment she considered just leaving town without her things—surely, the diamonds would buy her anything she needed on the way and back. She reasoned, however, that she would need her clothes and smaller, essential items until the time she could pawn off the jewels. While she'd be alone, on the road and searching for food. Yet again.

The thought made Sannie's stomach curdle with anxiety, pulling the tears back to her eyes. She pulled Lady to a stop before the inn, taking labored breaths through her busted lip. As she dismounted Lady, her boot hit one of the straps at a bad angle and broke it, causing all of the bags to tumble down to the ground.

“Damnit!” Sannie cursed, leaning down to pick them up. When she picked one bag up, the other, having been tied to the first one, turned upside down, spilling its contents all over the open, dusty road. Sannie reached up to gather the fallen bandages, and the stolen letters, hastily shoving them back into the bag they came out of. She tied that bag up and then picked up another one—the one that carried a few books that she cherished reading when she went riding with Lady.

The bags promptly tore when she lifted it—its stitches had come loose, causing the books to tumble out of the bag and into the dirt.

“*Dammit!*” Sannie yelled, throwing her bags down onto the ground with uncontrollable frustration. She stared at the dusty mess around her for another second before crouching down on the ground beside her tattered books and bursting into tears.

*I can't believe this! I'm leaving him again! Once again, my life is gonna turn into a game of cat and mouse! To make people afraid or to die.*

Another sob rolled up Sannie's throat and escaped from her lips. She screwed up her eyes as tears leaked down her cheeks, dripping down on her silken skirt. Sannie tucked her head into her arms and began to cry in earnest, unable to stand the idea of being on the run once more.

“Moonpie?” a voice came from behind Sannie, making her heart lurch. She looked up from her arms, slick and wet with her tears. When her eyes landed on the person standing before her, she gasped, hastily jumping to her feet.

“Alice!” Sannie croaked.

“What in the name of...” The old woman trailed off worriedly as she surveyed Sannie's appearance. Blood had dried along the side of her face, with a bruise steadily rising on her forehead and underneath her nose. Sannie could feel the edges of her teeth digging into her swollen, trembling lip.

“My goodness!” Alice cried, raising a

wrinkled hand to her face. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I- I...” Sannie trailed off, as her head spun slightly. She felt the world around her tilt a bit sideways.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, steady now,” Alice said, reaching out to grab a hold of Sannie’s arm. “Who did this to you? Was it that blonde man? Huh? Oh, I’m gonna wring his neck!”

Sannie nodded weakly, unable to muster a more concrete response. Her body and mind were both so weary and broken...

“You need some care, Moonpie,” Alice said decisively. “You’re coming with me, right now.”

“I can’t...” Sannie mumbled weakly, unable to resist her pulling. “I have to go...”

“You’re not going anywhere until I take care of that wound,” Alice said sternly, glaring



at her with narrowed eyes. Feeling hot tears of gratefulness flood her eyes, Sannie nodded yes and began to walk alongside her.

“Can you ride?” Alice asked her. When Sannie nodded, she pressed on. “Are you sure? You look like you’d fall off the horse.”

“Lady won’t let me fall,” Sannie mumbled tiredly.

“Okay, well, follow me then,” Alice said, pulling away from Sannie. “I’ll take you to my daughter’s house.”

“Alice, you don’t have to—” Sannie began.

“I know that I don’t *have* to, Moonpie,” Alice deadpanned. “Now, get on the horse! And come with me.”

Sannie sighed and mounted Lady, feeling part scared and part relieved to be stopped by someone. She’d have raced along

without stopping had anyone other than Alice stopped her. Besides, she was right; Sannie *did* need care. The wound on her forehead was swelling up rather frighteningly, with dried blood tugging at the fine hair on her skin. She was afraid to touch it, so she felt the skin near the wound. It was hot and tender, and desperately needed to be cleaned.

Alice looked up at her and gave her a kind smile, allaying a few of Sannie's fears. *Has she testified against me? It doesn't... look like it. Maybe I can stop by her house for a bit. The Pinkertons will still be dealing with Ivan then.*

Taking in a deep breath through her bruised nose, Sannie urged Lady to trot behind the old woman, slowly following her path. Alice hobbled along the road surely and happily, occasionally waving hello to a couple of people that passed by her.

"Do you... Do you live here?" Sannie asked Alice unsurely.

"No, my daughter does," the old

woman answered contentedly. “But I come here often to visit her.”

“She’s very lucky to have you,” Sannie stated plainly.

Alice shot her a smile from the ground. “Do you see those trees up ahead?” the old woman asked Sannie, raising a finger to point at a row of apple trees that lined the horizon.

“Yeah,” Sannie said, narrowing her eyes.

“That’s my daughter’s orchard,” Alice explained happily. “It’s the most beautiful little place—I think you’ll like it!”

Sannie smiled softly at Alice’s exuberance. *I’m actually gonna miss her when she’s not around anymore*, Sannie realized bitterly. *The only person other than Roy who ever saw goodness in me.*

Sannie and Alice trod down the dirt

road for about fifteen minutes before the apple orchard made its presence evident in the surrounding air. Crisp, chilly wind blew in from the fields, heavy with the sweet scent of apples. Sannie took in a deep breath, her lungs greatly enjoying the welcoming waft of fresh air.

Soon, they arrived at the gate of the orchard, lined with tall, thick apple trees on either side of the central path. Alice opened up the gate with her keys and waved Sannie in through the entrance. With her mouth hanging slightly ajar, Sannie entered through the gate that read *Mary's Magical Apples*.

It was like walking into a fairytale—cool, apple-scented breeze, wide rolling paths that stretched toward the horizon with only a couple of small, cute huts in between. As Lady ventured into the depths of the orchard, Sannie stared around her in awe, brushing aside billowing strands of her long brown hair.

“Wow, this place is incredible,” Sannie commented as she tried to spot the edge of the orchard on either side.

“My daughter’s husband inherited it when his father passed,” Alice said she strolled down the path contentedly. “He goes off to work in the nearby school and she maintains the orchard. She really enjoys it.”

“I don't see why she wouldn't,” Sannie said, admiring the shiny, blood red apples that hung from the trees.

“Fresh air, lots of space to have your children run around and go on rides with your horse...” Alice trailed off as she sighed happily. “She has a good life.”

Sannie’s heart twisted with jealousy and longing, but she ignored it, trying to focus on the beauty that surrounded her.

“There she is!” Alice said, pointing straight ahead. Sannie followed her arm’s path and saw a tall, slender woman with long red hair standing on a ladder placed against a nearby tree. She cut the apples off the trees one by one and tossed them into the basket

that hung in her arm.

“Mary!” Alice cried, waving her hands in the air. The redheaded woman turned around to the sound of her mother’s voice and her face broke out into a smile.

“Come here,” Alice said as she waved her over. Sannie dismounted Lady lithely, letting her weary feet land on the sandy earth below. This was such a sudden change from Matilda Bests’ stuffy, velveteen mansion full of blood, hatred, and broken hearts.

Alice’s daughter was willowy and graceful. She approached her mother with open arms and gave her a tight hug. “I thought you were gonna be at the jailhouse,” the redheaded woman said.

“Something more important came up,” Alice said with a shrug. She then turned to Sannie. “Sannie, this is my daughter, Mary,” she said, “Mary, this is Sannie.”

“Hello,” Mary said with a kind but

confused smile on her youthful face. The instant she smiled, Sannie could see the familiar curves and lines of Alice's face in Mary's.

"Hi," Sannie said with a polite smile. If Mary was bothered by the battered and bloody condition Sannie was in, she showed no sign of it. She merely turned to her mother with a raised brow.

"I take it you need some first aid," she asked with a wry smile.

"Yes, and a cup of tea, if you will honey," Alice said, huddling into her jacket. "It's gettin' chilly here!"

"Yes, it is," Mary agreed, ushering them forward with her long arms. "The stables are close by. I'll take you there. You have a beautiful horse!"

Mary led them along the main path of the orchard, gayly describing her work with the fruits. She seemed quite happy in her life,

satisfied by her work and her marriage. She and her husband had married ten years ago and had been running this orchard together for the past seven. Profits had improved steadily as Little Rosa continued to expand, allowing the couple to live well beyond their means. Sannie listened to Mary's story with longing and ache. The simplicity of her life, the purity and peacefulness of it made Sannie's heart burn. The life she had always wanted, always out of her reach, was now demonstrated before her in no uncertain ways.

After tying and leaving Lady in the stables, Mary led Sannie and Alice into a small, but sturdy, wooden cabin. The interiors were simple, yet warm and inviting. One side was a small, single bed with a shiny wooden table and chair beside it. On the other side were a row of cupboards stocked with various items visible through the glass panes on them. A large window spanned across one wall of the cabin, open to the thick of the apple orchard. Sunny rays filtered into the room through the leaves that shadowed the hut from outside.

"This place is just stunning," Sannie



said, shaking her head. "I could literally live here."

"Our guests enjoy it quite a bit," Mary said congenially. "So does my husband when he wants to spend some time alone writing."

"It's really beautiful," Sannie said softly.

"Thank you," Mary replied. "I'll get you a first aid kit—that cut looks bad."

"Could you also get us some tea, dear?" Alice asked, unwrapping her shawl and placing it over a nearby chair.

"Sure, Ma," Mary replied. "Sannie, would you like some tea?"

"Uh, no thank you," Sannie said immediately, awkwardly shifting on her feet.

"You can have one cup—Mary makes excellent tea," Alice said, pulling off her coat.

“Oh, all right then,” Sannie said congenially. “One cup.”

“Excellent,” Mary said, smiling sweetly. She turned to walk over to a row of wooden cupboards that line the opposite wall of the room. She opened one of the drawers and pulled out a moderately heavy looking box from inside. It was metallic and grey and seemed to rattle when Mary moved it. She brought the box along with her to the creaky single bed that sat in the room and placed it on the table next to it.

“Thank you, darlin’,” Alice said, giving her daughter’s hand a little squeeze.

“It’s no problem,” Mary replied sweetly. “I’ll get you both some tea.”

Alice nodded, watching her daughter leave with contentment in her eyes.

“She’s really very hospitable to a stranger with blood all over their face,” Sannie

commented wryly.

“She’s a good one,” Alice said wistfully.  
“She’s very kind.”

“She’s very lucky to have a mother like you,” Sannie said wistfully, gazing out of the window at the bountiful orchard outside.

“Sit down, Moonpie,” Alice said, motioning at the bed. Sannie sat down and Alice placed a hand under her chin to examine the cut on her forehead carefully.

“There’s splinters in this,” Alice said with a hiss.

“Ugh, no wonder it hurts so much,” Sannie mumbled.

Alice took a cloth and poured rubbing alcohol on it. Carefully balling up the cloth, she began to gently clean the wound on Sannie’s face.

Sannie hissed loudly as the alcohol touched her skin. Pain seared through the wound like a tiny fire. "It hurts, Alice, it hurts!" she said warily.

"Try not to think about it, it'll be over soon," Alice said, tapping her forehead lightly. "Tell me...where are your parents? What happened to them?"

Sannie sighed heavily. "My father died before I was born. My mother didn't want me, so she abandoned me. She gave me up to anyone who would take me when I was a baby."

"Dear Lord, that's terrible," Alice said, wincing.

"Yeah..." Sannie trailed off. "Although, that is how Roy's mother found me."

"Roy who? Roy Harting?" Alice asked brightly. "The sheriff?"

Sannie nodded silently.

“I didn’t know you knew him!” Alice said.

“Yeah, we grew up together,” Sannie said softly. “His mother was really ... really nice. She always loved children and she said she thought I was adorable.” The faint memory made Sannie smile. She hadn’t remembered Edna in a long time. “Anyway, she chose to raise me and Roy together. But... that didn’t last long either. One day, when we were really young, she went out to find some food and she just never returned. Since then, it’s just been Roy and I.”

“You two have been through a lot together, huh?” Alice said contemplatively.

“More than you can imagine,” Sannie replied. Just then, Mary entered the room with a steaming hot pot.

“Woah, that’s a lot of tea,” Sannie said, eyeing the enormous pot that she’d brought

with her.

Mary chuckled. “This isn’t tea! It’s hot water to clean your wounds.”

“Oh,” Sannie replied feeling a bit silly. “Thanks.”

“Thank you, dear,” Alice said as she accepted the pot and placed it on the table. She began to dip fresh rags into the boiling hot water and then squeeze them out.

Sannie turned to gaze once more at the wavy, sunny apple trees. They filled the crisp evening air with the most amazing smell of fresh, tangy apples. The sky above was vast and uninhibited, steadily turning pink to bid adieu to the sun and welcome the moon.

“This orchard is really incredible,” Sannie commented. “I could easily live here forever.”

“Maybe you could open your own one

day,” Alice replied as she pressed the warm, damp cloth against the cut on Sannie’s forehead. Sannie hissed as pain seared through her skin.

“Oh dear, that man really hit you hard,” Alice noted, her forehead wrinkling angrily.

“It wasn't him...” Sannie trailed off, wincing as the heated water entered her wound. “It was the widow, Matilda Best.”

“What?” Alice asked, surprised.

Sannie relayed her story to Alice and told her everything that had happened in the mansion. She told her about the owner of the diamonds, about the old widow’s admission to murder, and Ivan’s plan to steal her diamonds and disappear. “I went over there to warn her because I thought Ivan would kill her for the diamonds. But *she* wanted to kill *me*!” Sannie cried. “Can you believe that?”

“Why?” Alice questioned tapping an old

finger against her chin. “Why does she hate you so much?”

“She thinks I’m a witch,” Sannie replied, using a damp cloth to wipe some of the blood stuck in her hair. “Which is completely Ivan’s doing. He’s been feeding her lies about me this entire time. Every time he went to her house to *consult* with her, he was actually making a secret plan with her to betray me!”

“That man is vile,” Alice said in a distasteful tone.

“He wasn’t like this before, you know,” Sannie said softly, turning to gaze at the orchard that lay beyond the window. “He had hope. And compassion. Somewhere along the way, he lost all of them...”

“Bad men are bad because they let themselves become so,” Alice said, wringing the bloodied cloth into a bucket. “It takes strength and true compassion to stay kind, in spite of hardships.”



“Roy is strong and kind,” Sannie said, fiddling with her skirt. “More than I could ever hope to be.”

“How did you both get separated?” Alice asked her hesitantly, brushing aside her greying hair.

“It’s a long story, and I ... I don’t want to talk about it,” Sannie replied sadly.

“That’s okay, Moonpie,” Alice said kindly, giving her a comforting smile.

Sannie couldn’t help but return her expression. “Thank you. We just... We got separated a few years ago and we couldn’t... we couldn’t find each other again. Until I came here.”

“Huh,” Alice said thoughtfully, leaning away from Sannie for a bit. “You know what? That actually adds up.”

“What?” Sannie asked.

“That sheriff is a catch, but he’s famously never seemed to be too interested in the women in this town,” Alice said, tilting her head to the right. “And there are some beautiful, marriable women here.”

“Really?” The thought made Sannie smile.

“Really, Moonpie,” she said, tying a piece of clean, dry cloth around Sannie’s freshly wiped forehead. “I was sure he either had no interest in women, or he’d fallen in love with some girl already. Someone who none of these other women could hope to match.”

Sannie sighed heavily as a pang of agony hit her in the chest. *No one could match you either*, she thought to herself, picturing Roy’s stunning blue eyes in her mind.

“So, it’s you then?” Alice asked her with a coy grin as she neatly tucked the end of the

bandage she wrapped around Sannie's head.  
"You're the girl?"

"Maybe I was," Sannie said with a shrug. "But I'm not anymore."

"Why not?" Alice asked, leaning away from her to get a better look at her face.

Sannie sniffed, looking up at her guiltily. "I'm going on the run again, Alice. I will have to be on the road soon. *Very* soon. Probably by tonight."

"What?" Alice asked, greying eyebrows wrinkling together. She set down the cloth in her hand on the table next to her, eyeing Sannie's face carefully. "You're running away?"

"Yes," Sannie croaked.

"Why?"

"I stole the diamonds. I took them with

me.” Sannie blurted out rashly. “They’re in my bag.”

“What?”

“Victoria’s diamonds, Alice!” Sannie cried. “The ones you told me about. They’re in my bag right now.”

Alice’s eyes widened with shock. “Nooo...” she slowly breathed.

“Yes,” Sannie nodded.

“I thought you said you weren’t gonna steal ‘em,” Alice said, sitting down beside Sannie on the cot. Sannie sighed as she felt the old woman’s warm presence beside her.

“I thought so, too,” she replied, eyeing the wooden floorboards underneath her.

“Then... What happened?” Alice asked.

Sannie shook her head in derision. "Ivan... He said he's gonna tell the Pinkertons all about how I robbed stagecoaches with him. He's gonna tell them about every con I've ever run alongside him. Every play I've played." She looked up at Alice who stared at her with wordless attention. "If I stay here, I'm going to jail, Alice. There's no getting around it."

"I know I'm supposed to be honest," Sannie continued, turning her eyes back to the floor, "and I'm supposed to own up to my actions or whatever, but... *How?* How can I sign up to spend years behind bars, willingly? How can I give away my freedom when that is more important to me than my very breath?" Sannie sniffed, despair weighing heavily on her heart. "There's no redemption for my kind, Alice. My past mistakes will haunt me forever, and my will to live freely will keep my feet running. I can never stop. I see that now."

"That is not true," Alice said in a soft but firm tone. Sannie looked up to see her face lit with confidence. "I know that is not true. There is redemption for you in this world."

“Then how come I can’t find it?” Sannie demanded, one tear drop leaking out and spilling down her left cheek. “I’ve searched all the prairies for a place where I can stand still, and I’ve come up empty. This is my last option. I can use these diamonds and find a place where no one knows me. Where I can start afresh.”

Alice frowned, chewing on her lower lip. “What does the sheriff think of all this?”

“He didn’t stop me from taking the diamonds and leaving, but he refused to join my side,” Sannie said in a hollow voice. “He said he doesn’t want to be on the run, ever again.”

Alice raised a greying brow. “The sheriff was on the run?”

Sannie’s face paled. “Uh ... no! No, he wasn’t. Forget I said that.” She suddenly got up to her feet, inwardly cursing her tendency to blabber. “You know what? I think I feel, uh, better now, Alice. I should really be on my

way, there's a lot for me to—”

“Hold on, hold on, now!” Alice raised her hands in the air, a slight smile dawning on her kind features. “I haven’t testified against you! You know I’m not going to, right?”

Sannie stared back at her, dumbfounded.

“You know I’m not gonna tell anyone anything you’re saying to me?” Alice asked again, her dark brown eyes wide and open.

Her trust mystified Sannie. *Why is she so kind to me? I betrayed her, I robbed her at gunpoint. Why—?*

“Why would you do that for me?” Sannie blurted out.

“Because you were kind to me once,” Alice said, fingering the bright red brooch pinned to her chest. “I remember that. That meant that there is kindness in you. No one

can deny it.”

“It is not kindness to leave you with one trinket after stealing everything else from you!” Sannie protested.

“People can do unkind things and still have the capacity for kindness,” Alice said calmly. “If their kindness is never rewarded in this world—which it is often not—then they do not use it. But it doesn’t mean that that part of them is gone.”

“You’re trusting me too much!” Sannie said, balling her fists up. Roy’s heartbroken face assaulted her mind, twisting her innards. “I am not someone to be loved or trusted. I will only bring you pain!”

Alice raised her palms in the air once more. “Just ... sit down for a moment, Moonpie. Take a breath.”

“Breathing is not going to change anything, Alice!”



“Just try it out, then! Shouldn’t make a difference, right?” Alice retorted with a small smirk.

Sannie bit down on her lip and winced again. “Ah, I keep forgetting about that!”

“Come on, just sit down,” Alice said, pulling down on Sannie’s wrist till she sat back on the bed. Sannie reluctantly pulled in a deep breath through her nose. Alice reached over and brushed a strand of her hair aside with her fingers.

“You’re downright frightened by this world, aren’t ya?” she asked Sannie.

“I’m tired,” Sannie corrected her, the tears rising to the brim of her eyes once again. “I’m tired of this world. I’ve been running for a long time.”

“Do you really wanna know what I think?” Alice asked her gingerly. Sannie paused for a moment and then nodded.

“I think you leaving Little Rosa with those diamonds will be a huge mistake,” Alice said.

Sannie looked up at her through her thick, wet lashes. “You do?”

“Yes!” Alice cooed as though she were describing the most obvious fact. “Right now, your only crimes are petty theft and robbery. These diamonds are pricey enough to put you behind the slammer for life if you end up getting caught!”

“It’s the only way I get to live freely,” Sannie mumbled.

“Unless you get caught before you escape, in which case you’re never getting out, ever!” Alice said, slowly getting up off her seat. “Moonpie, sometimes the right decision is to *not* take a shortcut.”

“Then what do I do, Alice? Tell me. Ivan is going to testify against me and so is Mrs. Best. There is no way that I can stay here

and keep my freedom. Every path I think of is a dead end. Which way do I go?" Sannie asked, shaking her head heavily. "Is my only option jail? Is that where all the roads lead? Is there no way for me to be free?"

Suddenly, Alice's kind, brown eyes brightened as a series of unreadable calculations zoomed behind them.

"What?" Sannie asked.

"Has Ivan already testified against you? You think?" Alice asked her, scratching her chin.

"Uh, the Pinkertons were just barely getting there when I left so I think we still have some time," Sannie replied. "Why?"

Sannie looked up at the old woman curiously as she began to smile, her thin, wrinkled lips slowly curving upwards. Alice stood up and began to gather a couple of things, throwing them into her bag.

“Why are you smiling?” Sannie asked Alice quizzically, raising one sharp eyebrow. “Where... Where are we going?”

“We’re going to jailhouse,” Alice said. “We need to leave *right now*.”

“Why?” Sannie asked her.

“Well,” Alice began, her grin widening. “I know I said shortcuts are a bad idea, but I kind of just thought of a brilliant shortcut.”

“You did?”

“What if,” Alice began, “you could hand over the diamonds, stay in Little Rosa, and also not go to jail?”

Sannie jerked her head backwards in slight shock. “That ... would be *ideal*.”

Alice’s grin turned into a wicked little smirk. “In that case, I think I have a plan. I’ll tell you on the way.”

*Am I really going to the jailhouse? Right now?*

“Just trust me, Moonpie! Come on!”

# Epilogue

Half an hour later, Sannie was trotting toward the jailhouse on Lady. Alice had agreed to ride on Lady too, after much convincing. She sat behind Sannie and held onto her waist with all her might. At every slight lurch in the step, Alice would tighten her grip on Sannie, twisting her jacket within her fists.

“You’re not gonna fall,” Sannie promised her for the fiftieth time with a roll of her eyes. She made sure that Lady didn’t go too fast, lest she scared the old woman.

“I’ve just never been one for horses, Moonpie,” Alice said meekly. “They move strangely. It makes me nauseous.”

“Well, we’re almost there, so hold onto your vomit,” Sannie advised her, eyeing the silhouette of the jailhouse in the distance. *I’m actually doing this*, Sannie pondered as they approached the ominous looking building.

## *Going straight to meet the Devil.*

“Are you sure this’ll work?” Sannie asked Alice nervously. “I’m kind of uncomfortable with how I’m just handing myself over to the agents here.”

“I haven’t testified against you, and hopefully, neither has Ivan,” Alice whimpered through Sannie’s clothes. “If anything will work, it is this. In fact, even if Ivan has testified... I think this could work.”

“Either way, it’s my best chance of staying with Roy,” Sannie said nervously, narrowing her eyes as she lightly touched Lady’s underside with her foot to make her go a bit faster.

“Easy, please,” Alice begged.

“The sooner it’s over, the better you’ll feel,” Sannie promised her, nudging Lady to clear the last of the distance between them and the jailhouse.

*I wonder if Roy's in there,* Sannie thought to herself as they reached the country stables, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them. Sannie unsaddled Lady and tied her up in the stables with plenty of hay nearby and walked out to join Alice who stood waiting outside.

“Feeling a bit better?” Sannie asked her as she approached.

“Yes,” Alice replied. “I got a bit green there, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did,” Sannie said. She sighed heavily.

“All right, Moonpie,” Alice said, eyeing her. “I’ll go in first, and then you come in later, as we discussed. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sannie said, nodding deeply. “Alice, once again, I can’t thank you enough —”

“Thank me once it works, sweetie,”



Alice said with a jovial grin before trotting over to the main door of the jailhouse.

Sannie waited outside for a good fifteen, twenty minutes, drawing figures in the sandy ground beneath her and feeding Lady apples. She couldn't keep her mind from drifting off to Roy. Each time she saw a tall cowboy riding by on a brown horse, her mind played tricks on her and made her wonder if it was Roy. *I wonder if he's in the jailhouse already*, Sannie thought.

Once she thought the time was right, Sannie walked back into the stables to Lady. She wanted to take a moment with her before she went into the jailhouse. She gently brushed the side of Lady's face, looking her in the eyes.

"Just in case I don't come back," Sannie whispered to her. "I love you."

The horse snorted lightly, touching her snout to Sannie's forehead. Giving her a last, loving pat, Sannie walked out of the stables

and into Little Rosa's jailhouse.

The inside of the jailhouse was quite busy. All the desks were occupied by men that scribbled wildly on their forms, barely looking up from their tables. One by one as the forms were getting filled, they passed them from one table to the next. They seemed to be urgently processing some kind of paperwork. Sannie drifted away from the door, taking a right to walk toward the deputy's desk. *Logan Phillip*, his desk tag read.

"Is the sheriff in here?" Sannie asked loudly, making the deputy look up from his desk in mild surprise. His eyes widened at the sight of Sannie and then immediately narrowed.

"You!" he cried, leaning away from his desk. "You stole the widow's diamonds!"

Sannie rolled her eyes. "I didn't *steal* them if I'm bringing them back! Is the sheriff here?"

“The sheriff isn't here anymore,” Philip said in an odd tone, adjusting his hat. “He resigned from his position.”

“He *what?*” Sannie’s question was a half-shriek.

“He resigned. Said he’d had enough o’ Little Rosa,” Philip replied with a deep frown on his face. “Wouldn’t tell me why or even look me in the eye—”

“God dammit, Roy,” Sannie mumbled, glancing at the room around her. *He quit? Why the hell would he do that?* “When was this?”

“He just left a half an hour ago,” Phillip said. “He came here to drop those two off.” Phillip jerked his chin at something behind Sannie. Sannie turned around to see what it was.

From inside the jail cell that held the criminals before they were tried, Ivan’s icy, grey eyes stared back at her with a numb, deadened hatred. A shoddy sling held his

broken arm close to his body and one half of his face was red and swollen from being hit. There was a bandage wrapped around his torso with a round, dark red blood stain on it.

Sannie stared at him in silence and he stared back wordlessly. There was nothing left to say between them. Sannie pulled out the small, velvet pouch full of diamonds and clutched it strongly between her fingers. Ivan's eyes flickered down to her hand and back, but he said nothing.

*It's over, whatever we had, Sannie thought she stared back at him defiantly. Friendship, companionship... whatever it was, it's over now. He chose his path and its time I choose mine.*

Beside Ivan, the old widow, Matilda Best, lay curled up against a cot, her arms shielding her face from the world outside.

“Have they already testified to the agents?” Sannie asked Phillip.

“No, not yet,” Phillip said.

*YES! This makes things easier!*

“The agent had lunch and a witness to speak with,” the deputy continued. “She’s still in there.”

*That must be Alice.* “Didn’t you try to stop the sheriff from quitting?” Sannie asked him, frowning. “How could you let him leave?”

“He wasn’t listenin’ to reason, ma’am. His mind was made up,” the deputy replied. “You think I didn’t try? He’s my friend!”

Sannie stepped back, disarmed by his sincerity. “Where did he go?” she asked him.

“He didn’t say,” the deputy replied, getting out of his chair to pass a file to the desk behind him. “Probably just went back home.”

“Can you tell me where he lives?”  
Sannie asked.

Phillip narrowed his eyes at her. “Why do you care so much ‘bout the sheriff?”

“I... He’s my friend, too,” Sannie said simply, her eyes falling to the floor.

“I see,” the deputy said, adjusting his topper. “The sheriff lives right by King’s Barbers, you know the red building with the —”

“With the rooster drawn across the whole front wall, yeah I got it,” Sannie said with a nod, remembering the ridiculous looking building she’d once passed. “On the left of the rooster building or the right?”

“The left,” he replied. “I’m just tellin’ you ‘caused if he doesn’t want you there, you’ll be in deep trouble yourself.”

“Thanks, Phillip,” Sannie said, rolling

her eyes. *I'll go find Roy after speaking to the Agent. I have an upper hand since Ivan is yet to testify against me.* Her fingers trembled in her hand with anticipation. *This is my chance. My only chance to keep Roy in my life. I can fix this. I must!*

“Agent Harell’s inside. I’ll go tell him you’re here,” Philip said as he entered the wooden doors of the sheriff’s office. “Good on ya for coming back, Miss. We thought you were a right crook.”

Sannie managed to give him a small, tight smile in return before relaxing her features once more. It was hard to pretend when she was this nervous. *This isn't like other cons. There are such few defined rules,* Sannie thought as she waited for Phillip to reappear from the sheriff’s office. *I have much more at stake than just a handful of gold coins. One wrong move and I could end up in jail for half a decade.* As anxiety reared its ugly head, Sannie affixed Roy’s handsome face in her mind. *I can do this,* she told herself, picturing his vibrant blue eyes. *I just have to be convincing. Both Alice and I do.*

Suddenly, the shiny doors of the sheriff's office flew open and Lester Harrell's handsome but aging face appeared from behind them. When his dark hazel eyes landed on Sannie, they widened with shock and surprise, a curious grin dawning on his thin lips.

"Well, well, well," Agent Harrell cooed, his greying beard twitching. "I thought I'd have to hunt you down, Madame Cassandra."

"Instead, I found you," Sannie replied with a sly smile. "Must be your lucky day."

Lester chuckled, surveying her pointedly. "Only you can be so charming with so many wounds on you, Madame."

"I have gifts for you, Agent, and let's just say they took some effort to procure," Sannie said smoothly, giving him a small smile. She tried not to wince as the swelling in her lip ached.



“Hmmm,” Agent Harrell hummed, looking her up and down. “Are they expensive gifts?”

“Priceless,” Sannie shot back.

The agent grinned. “Alrighty, Madame Cassandra. Come on in, then.”

Sannie followed him into the sheriff’s office, steeling herself. *It’s time to perform Sannie. This is it. This conversation will decide your future for the next five years.*

As she entered the office, she wished Roy was here. He would be able to tell if their plan would work or not with a certainty that would have comforted her greatly.

Alice was still seated in the sheriff’s office, just as Sannie expected. She looked up at Sannie with the perfect expression of nonchalance, without an ounce of recognition, before looking back at Agent Harrell blankly. Sannie looked at the Agent blankly too, politely awaiting his instructions.

Agent Harrell stared between the two of them carefully, like a hawk searching for prey. “Sit down, Madame,” he said, motioning to the chair beside Alice. Sannie feigned a moment of confusion before sitting down beside her.

“Do you recognize each other?” the agent asked them bluntly.

Sannie frowned just slightly, demonstrating confusion, and shook her head. “Am I supposed to?” she asked.

Alice looked up at her with slightly narrowed eyes. “I don't think we've met,” she said, raising one wrinkly palm toward Sannie. “My name's Alice Deerwood.”

“Hello, Mrs. Deerwood, I'm Madame Cassandra,” Sannie said, shaking Alice's hand with hers. *The old bat's quite the actress*, Sannie noted, watching the widow's nonchalant expression with a slight bemusement.

“Oh, are you *the* Madame Cassandra?” Alice asked interestedly. “The soothsayer my daughter keeps talking about?”

“Why, yes I am,” Sannie said with a satisfied smile.

“I’ve been trying to get an appointment with you for days!” Alice replied, clapping her hands together. “But you were always unavailable!”

“It’s been a busy couple of days for me,” Sannie said politely, turning her eyes to the agent.

Agent Harrell was watching their exchange pointedly, his beady eyes flickering between the two women rapidly.

“Wait,” he began, eyeing Alice with surprise on his face. “You’re telling me you’ve never seen Madame Cassandra before? Ever?”

Alice shook her head slowly, “Not that I

recall. Why?”

“Mrs. Deerwood, Madame Cassandra is one of the prime suspects in your stagecoach robbery,” the agent informed her, folding his hands together.

“She is?” Alice asked, frowning incomprehensibly. “But ... I’ve never met her before in my life.”

Harrell’s eyes narrowed, his bear twitching. “Are you *sure* about that?”

“Yes, I am, Agent,” Alice confirmed.

Harrell shook his head, pulling out a sheet of paper. “This is the portrait that *you* helped us make,” he said, unfurling the drawing of Sannie’s likeness. “I’d say this is Madame Cassandra, yet you say you never met her before.”

Alice peered at the portrait with raised brows. “Agent, I remember the portrait I

helped make, and while I see how this picture looks like this woman, she wasn't the one who robbed me. The woman with that man was shorter, and stockier."

"Mrs. Deerwood, I find it rather hard to believe you. Madame Cassandra looks very much like the person in this portrait and she is a known friend of Kidd Jack, the man who robbed you."

"Are you suggesting it's impossible for two people to look alike, Agent Harrell?" Sannie asked, folding her hands on her lap.

"Of course not, Madame, I'm merely trying to make sure Mrs. Deerwood knows what she's saying," Harrell replied.

"I'm fifty years old, not senile, Agent." Alice rolled her eyes at him.

"That was never my implication," Agent Harrell clarified hurriedly.

“She is not the person that robbed me,” Alice stated in a clear, ringing tone. “If you can’t find the people who are responsible, then just tell me.”

“We have already found the man that robbed you, Mrs. Deerwood. He’s in our custody,” Harrell said. “You can be sure that he’ll be aptly punished for his actions. We just need your help to locate his accomplice.”

“I *am* helping you,” Alice said earnestly. “But she just isn’t the one.”

Harrell let out a forceful breath, leaning back in his seat. “All right, Mrs. Deerwood. Thanks for coming in. We’ll let you know when we have more leads.”

“Thank you, Agent,” Alice said, getting to her feet slowly. “Especially for catching that Kidd Jack. That man is vile.”

“Agreed,” Harrell said with a short nod.

Without giving Sannie so much as a glance, Alice turned away from them and hobbled out of the sheriff's office, letting the door shut behind her. Sannie watched her leave and then turned to face Agent Harrell, comfortably waiting for him to break the silence.

"I gotta tell ya, Madame," Agent Harrell said, leaning forward with his fingers folded together, "I'm very shocked that Mrs. Deerwood didn't recognize you."

"I'm not," Sannie said plainly.

"I mean, don't get me wrong, I've been in cases where we got the wrong guy from the portrait, and then we found the actual culprit a bit later on and were shocked... But here, there was no other option. No other suspect." The agent shook his head slowly, his eyes trained on Sannie curiously. "How could she say it wasn't you?"

"I told you, I never robbed any stagecoaches," Sannie replied casually. "I'm a

swindler and a con artist, I'll admit that. I don't really know how to see the future."

"Obviously." The agent shrugged.

"But, I'm *not* a robber," Sannie said firmly.

"So it would seem," Agent Harrell said quietly. "Our only available witness doesn't seem to recognize you at all. However," Agent Harrell eyes bore into her with determination, "you did attack the widow Best today and steal her diamonds."

Sannie let out a laugh. "Is that what she told you?"

"Yes, she did," he replied. "And so did Kidd Jack."

"I went to Matilda Best's house because Ivan told me he was going to rob her and run away with the diamonds, even if he had to *kill* her. His words," Sannie said. "You had just



told me that he was a bank robber and that he *murdered* people to get what we wanted. I knew that he would hurt the widow to get her diamonds, and so I went to her house to *warn* her.”

“Instead of listening to me, *she* attacked *me*,” Sannie said pointedly.

“Why would she do that?” the agent asked.

“Ivan had been seducing her all this time to get closer to her jewels,” Sannie replied. “He told her lies about me to turn her against me, convinced her I was a witch. She had a gun and she tried to shoot me—yeah—and I had to hide behind the pillar for dear life. She even admitted to the murder of her husband, right before me!”

“She *what*?”

“She murdered him,” Sannie said matter-of-factly, looking the agent directly in his eyes. “She told me how her husband was

about to change his will and give all the diamonds to his daughter, and so, she murdered him. Said she suffocated him to death with a pillow.”

Harrell let out a low whistle, “If that’s true, she needs to be investigated. But it still doesn’t give you the right to steal the diamonds—”

“I didn’t steal them to keep them with me,” Sannie said seriously, pulling the blue velvet pouch out of her belt. “I stole them so she wouldn’t be able to hide them again, before being arrested. She has about twenty people working for her there—every second we waited gave her time to hide them away. I stole them so they could be returned to their rightful owner. Mr. Best’s daughter.”

With that, Sannie tossed the bag onto the agent’s desk. Agent Harrell leaned away from the blue velvet pouch, his eyes widening with shock. He looked up at Sannie. “You’re not serious?”

“Deadly so,” Sannie replied, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Why?” he asked her, his eyes shining with curiosity. “I mean... These diamonds are *priceless*. You could have easily bought a life far away from here. You could have taken place on a ship to England. The options are endless.”

“Yes, there’s a lot of room in this world to keep running,” Sannie nodded in agreement. “But I don’t want to run anymore. Besides—” She batted her lashes at him. “—I would never be stupid enough to steal something like that with the Pinkertons standing on my head. You guys can smell bad guys from a mile away, we all know that.”

Agent Harrell puffed up his chest proudly. “That is true. We would have caught you.” He gently turned one of the diamonds between his fingers. “Exquisite,” he whispered as he eyed the shiny, glittery stone. “The fabled Victoria’s diamonds.”

“Fruits of murder,” Sannie said, recalling the story Alice had told her.

“Passed on by murder,” Harrell said, setting the stone down amongst its copies.

Sannie nodded. “Am I free to go now, Agent? I believe I’ve answered all your questions sufficiently.”

The agent leaned back in his chair, adjusting his spectacles thoughtfully. “I’m not sure, Madame Cassandra. We still have to question Ivan and Mrs. Best, and your sentence will be decided based on that.”

*My sentence? Damn it!* “Why should I be sentenced when I’ve done nothing wrong?” Sannie protested.

“Because we’re not sure that you did nothing wrong, Madame,” the agent replied.

*I must keep my calm,* Sannie reminded herself as her fists balled up and her teeth

began to clench. *If I ever want to see Roy again, I need to do this right. Think, Sannie, think! What more can you give the Agent? What information could he use?*

The answer came to Sannie instantly.

“Look, Agent. I’m a simple woman,” Sannie began, folding her hands on the table elegantly. “I don’t need all this trouble. So, how about this? In my time roaming the country with Ivan, I saw that he would often take me to certain hidden spots where he would go to collect his ‘stash’.”

“His *stash*?” the agent asked, catching on to that word immediately.

“Yeah, he had secret stashes of gold, food and other useful items hidden away across the prairies and the desert. I never understood how he could maintain these stashes—we were always so poor—but he’d tell me that he had friends that helped him out and left him money, food and jewels in previously decided locations.”

“What kind of friend would do *that*?”

“Exactly,” Sannie said, pointing a finger at him. “No kind of friend would do that. Unless that friend is a thief that needed somewhere to hide their bank loot.”

Agent Harrell’s eyes sparkled. “You think you know where the stolen bonds from the banks are hidden?”

“I’m definitely sure that I do,” Sannie said with a nod. “I travelled with him for years, Agent, I remember the spots where he would always return. I would wait outside, he would go into some cave or opening in the ground and then he’d return with gold, money, sometimes even a bond or two.”

“Why didn’t you ever question him about how he was getting these ... gifts?”

“Have you ever been dirt poor, Agent?” Sannie asked him with a small, insulting smile. “So poor that you’ve crossed beyond hunger

into apathy toward all food? So poor that you repair the clothes on your back with rags?" Sannie leaned back in her chair. "I found a companion that could help me sustain my life. I didn't complain."

"Do you think you could show us these spots?" Agent Harrell asked. "The secret locations."

"I can," Sannie said sagely, wrapping her palms together. "Of course, I will have my price."

"Of course you will," Harrell said. "I suppose you want to walk freely."

"I do." Sannie nodded.

"You'll have to give us information that is worthy of our time for that, Madame," the agent warned her, staring at her over his spectacles.

"I think you'll find it *worthy* that while

you thought that Ivan has robbed only seven banks, he's actually robbed fifteen." Sannie gave him a satisfied grin.

The agent's eyes widened instantly. "Fifteen? Are you sure about that?"

"Yes, he told me so himself."

"We only knew of seven..." the agent said, rifling through his papers. "He must have disguised himself in the others!"

"Or sent his caring *friends*, instead of going in there himself," Sannie added with a shrug.

"This certainly changes things..." Agent Harrell looked away from her, his gaze focused on unseen things. Sannie watched him ponder over the new information patiently. She didn't want to rush him and come off as a guilty person hastily trying to buy their way out of jail.



“All right, fine,” Agent Harrell said finally, facing Sannie with a neutral look on his wizened face. “I’ll clear all the charges being levied against you, if and only if—” He raised a finger. “—We find what we’re looking for at the spots you show us.

Joy thundered through Sannie’s heart. She could barely believe his words. *Is this real? Is this actually happening?*

“You will find what you’re looking for,” Sannie said with a confident nod. “And there’s no charges you can levy on me after this? Not even for the stagecoaches?”

“Unless you were involved in robbing those fifteen banks, I think you can relax now, Madame Cassandra,” the agent said, pulling a pen and a sheet of paper before him. Sannie leaned back in her chair, stunned and exhausted by the turn of events. “Tell me everything you know.”

Taking a deep breath, Sannie began to list out all the stash hiding spots that Ivan had

ever taken her to, one by one. She described the most common routes they took to travel, reasoning that they could search the caves in and around those areas. She labelled all the cities where Ivan said his group of travelling bandits met for exchanging goods and the days that they arranged these meetings. The exercise made Sannie feel slightly sickened with herself, as though she were betraying people she knew.

*I want to be free, Sannie thought to herself sternly. I'm willing to pay any price to get to stay where my heart wants to. Roy's face flashed in her mind and her heart sped up its pace. To stay with whom my heart wants to.*

It took two and a half hours for Sannie to relay all the details that Harrell wanted to hear. His questions were diligent and pointed—he didn't let her spare a single detail. Sannie kept everything about the Bandit Queen and her operations close to her heart—there was no way that she could ever betray the woman that saved her life. Other than that, Sannie tried to be as helpful to the agent as she could be. In her heart of hearts, she hoped she'd never have to see Ivan again, and was happy

to share the information that would put that murderer behind bars. He was greedy and vile in a way the Bandit Queen never was. She wanted to rid her life of him, once and for all, to make room for the man she truly cared for.

“Once when we were near Springfield, Ivan just disappeared for five whole days,” Sannie said, feeling a bit tired and thirsty. “That is the longest time we’d ever spent apart, and I actually started to get worried. He came back all bruised and battered, saying he’d gotten into a fight with one of his mates.”

“The Springfield Bank robbery.” The agent nodded with his eyes closed. “Of course. He barely got out on that one—that’s what the security guard that beat him up told us. He stole bonds worth a cart of gold from that place!”

*Why did he never even share this wealth? Sannie wondered bitterly. All that time that I thought we would die of the lack of money and food, he was secretly keeping entire stashes of gold? No wonder he couldn’t wait to be back on the run!*

“There is an intricate cave system in the forest off the northwest border of Springfield,” Sannie continued. “Ivan would often use that spot as a hiding station...”

They spent another twenty minutes discussing the details of Ivan’s actions over the past three years. When Agent Harrell was finally done questioning Sannie, he leaned back in his chair, letting out a large sigh.

“Well,” he huffed with a satisfied smirk. “You’ve been more helpful than I’d dared to hope, Madame Cassandra.”

“You can call me Sannie,” Sannie said swiftly, much to her own surprise. “It’s short ... for Cassandra.”

“Yes, I gathered that,” Agent Harrell said. “I like it. Sannie.”

“Thank you,” Sannie said with a coy smile.

“Well, Sannie, I think you can go for now,” the agent said. “If we go to these spots and find what we’re looking for, I can promise you, you won’t be charged with anything.”

Sannie couldn’t help but smile widely, even though it made her busted lip hurt. “Really?”

“Yes.” Agent Harrell’s cheeks dimpled with a grin as he extended a hand toward her. “But you’re not allowed to leave town until our investigations are over.”

Joy and relief, so acute that it was painful, twisted in Sannie’s chest, filling up her lungs like an inflating balloon. “Yes, yes, I’ll be here,” she said as she shook his hand, trying to control her expression. “Thank you, Agent.”

“Thank you for your help, Sannie.”

Grinning to herself, Sannie turned to leave the sheriff’s office. It was very hard for

her to control herself—she wanted to jump up and down with pure excitement, perhaps go and give the Agent a hug, but instead, she sufficed herself with a quick trot, dying to get out of the jailhouse as fast as she could. Alice was waiting near the stable doors, clutching her collar tightly. Sannie’s heart warned as she noticed the worried frown on her lips, the ridge between her eyes. *She actually cares what happens to me*, she realized. She hurried to her, her feet flying over the ground.

“It worked!” Sannie cried just as Alice turned toward her. Her eyes widened for a moment before her mouth split into a wide grin.

“Are you serious?” she asked, raising her palms in the air as though she wanted Sannie to hand over some proof. Chuckling heartily, Sannie put her hands in hers.

“Yes, yes, he let me walk,” Sannie, barely able to draw breath. “I’m free! I- I-”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. She

reached forward and hugged Alice tightly, wrapping her hands around her short body.

“Oh!” Alice said in surprise before wrapping her arms around Sannie, patting her gently on the head.

“I could never have done this without you!” Sannie cried, tears flowing freely from her eyes now. *I’m free! I’m actually FREE!*

“What happened in there?” Alice asked her, pulling back a little. “What took you so long?”

“Well, he—” Sannie paused to sniff back some tears, “—he wanted me to tell him all about all the secret hiding spots Ivan had in exchange for the clean chit. Then he wanted me to tell him our old routes, the places we stopped at, all the times we disappeared... It took some time, but he said if they find something in the places I told them about, I’m free!”

“Oh, Moonpie!” Alice squealed,

squeezing her hands tightly. "That's wonderful! Oh, I'm so happy for you! Come here!" She reached forward to hug Sannie this time, squishing her between her arms lovingly. The tears overflowed through Sannie's eyes. She'd never experienced love like this. It made her feel like she had a mother.

"Oh, we need to celebrate this!" Alice cooed as she pulled away. "Let's go home!" she said brightly. "I'll ask Mary to make a proper feast—"

"Hang on, Alice," Sannie said, seriousness dawning on her suddenly. "I also found out that Roy quit his job."

"The sheriff quit?" Alice asked with a frown. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, but I need to find out," Sannie said, already walking toward the inside of the stables. "I need to go and find him before he does ... something."

Alice raised a confused brow at her.



“What is he gonna do?”

“I don't know, but he quit his *job!*” Sannie said with a shrug. She picked her saddle up off the hook. “I just need to go and find him and tell him everything that has happened.”

“All right, all right,” Alice nodded as Sannie began to attach the saddle to Lady's back. “But promise me you won't scatter off without meeting me once.”

Sannie turned to her with mild shock. “Scatter off? Alice, I'm not going anywhere. I will never forget you for what you did for me... I...” She trailed off as she tried to think of the right words. “It was always my wildest dream to be free. And today, you gave me that dream. You made it real”

Alice smiled back at her sweetly, brushing a strand of her greying hair aside with her hand. “Don't you worry about it,” she said in thick voice.

“How can I ever repay you?” Sannie asked Alice earnestly.

“Go find that boy and then come back to the orchard,” Alice said firmly. “We’ll have dinner.”

Sannie gave her hand a tight squeeze. “I will,” she promised.

Alice nodded at her supportively. Sannie leaned in to give her a kiss on her cheek.

*I’m coming to find you, Roy!* Sannie sang to herself as she raced over to Lady, her feet bouncing with excitement. Lady could sense it, too. She patted her feet on the ground repeatedly as Sannie saddled her and then mounted her. Sannie led her out into the open, her grip on her reins firm and confident. She didn’t remember the way to the rooster building exactly—she’d only ever seen it once—but it wasn’t too far away from her inn, and Sannie knew the way from here to there.

Without wasting another moment, she took off, riding Lady across the dusty pathways of Little Rosa. Alice waved goodbye at her as she zoomed past her and Sannie shot her a smile. She rode through many a battered house and a few really large, beautiful colonials, and passed shops and motels, schools and watering holes. This was a whole city, and now, after all this time, Sannie could live in one freely without any fear of being arrested.

The joy she felt at that thought spurred her on, pushing her to ride faster. The evening had reached its final point, the one after which it would surely turn into night. Sannie trotted along the paths quickly, only pausing to ask people the way to the rooster building. It was pretty infamous, and everyone seemed to know where it was, which led Sannie to find it quite easily.

It was right before her—the red wooden building, with the massive rooster painted on the wall that faced the street. If Sannie looked at it hard enough, she knew it would make her eyes water.

“To the left, to the left,” Sannie mumbled to herself, eyeing the hut that sat beside the rooster building. She led Lady toward it, staring at the closed door of the hut with uncertainty.

“Excuse me,” Sannie called to an old man that sat smoking a pipe in the hut next to the one she was in front of.

“Yeah?” the old man asked in a gravelly voice.

“Is this the sheriff’s house?” Sannie asked him.

“It was,” the man replied in a bored voice.

Sannie frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means he left. Just told me right now,” the man said lazily.

“Sir, I can’t understand what you’re saying,” Sannie said impatiently.

“It means he moved out, doll!” the old man said with a flash of irritation. “He took his crap, came and told me he was leavin’ town, and then left.”

“He *what?*” Sannie’s question was a shriek. “He *left* Little Rosa?”

“Are ya deaf?” the man grunted.

“Okay, all right,” Sannie said, pulling at Lady’s reins to steady her. “How long ago did he leave?”

“‘Bout half an hour,” the old man replied.

*That’s not too long. I can catch up to him!*  
“Did he say where he was going?” Sannie asked.

“We weren’t those kinda pals,” the old man grunted.

Sannie rolled her eyes at him. “Which way did he go?” she asked him.

“Northwards, toward the lake.”

“Huh,” Sannie said, her eyes falling to the ground below as something occurred to her. *If Roy was planning to leave town, he’d definitely visit the river one more time.*

Turning Lady around, Sannie began to race toward the inn, her heart focused on her quest. For the first time in her life, she was free. She was not about to let Roy get away.

Not this time.

Leaning down low on her horse, Sannie tapped Lady’s underside with her foot, urging her to race faster. It was tough to gain any real speed; the evening had settled and people were roaming about on the street, with carts

streaking by every now and then. Sannie's patience was getting thoroughly tested, and she dreaded to think of what she'd do if she couldn't find Roy. She wove Lady through the streets of Little Rosa, her long, brown locks billowing behind her in the chilly evening wind.

When the sign of Tom's Inn came back into Sannie's view, her heart swelled up with joy. She tapped Lady's underside once more, this time a bit harder, leaning all the way down. The mare kicked up a cloud of dust as she tore through the street and tilted to her right. Sannie and Lady galloped around the edge of the inn, coming face to face with the enormous lake that stood behind it. The fresh, green grass called to the mare's senses; her ears twitched as her powerful muscles dug into the ground ferociously, soaring Sannie toward the lake.

In the bright light of the full moon, the lake glowed like a million jewels floating together on a pool of blackness. Sannie turned just a bit to look at it but it made her hair fly across her face and hinder her vision. She turned back to the land that lay before her,

utterly transformed in the dark of the night. The trees that lined the land beyond the lake looked shadowed and uninviting now. Sannie screwed up her eyes and focused on the bright, vast expanse of the lake as she passed by it in a blur.

The thicker approached quickly and Sannie had to slow Lady down so they wouldn't run into any trees. Sannie raised herself up, straightening her back as she looked at the forest around her. The trees rose high above her, shady but noisy in the night. Little scattering here, a loud chatter there, and over all of it, the sound of the gurgling, winnowing river. Sannie didn't have to tell Lady—the mare could smell the river and she began to trot toward it.

Sannie's heart thudded loudly in her chest as the edge of thicket began to appear before her. *What if he's not here? What if he already left?*

She took in a deep breath and as she approached the final line of trees. The glittering river was visible between the bars of



blackness. Lady was excited now—she happily trotted through the last of the trees, taking Sannie out into the open before the riverbank.

It stunned her again. The sheer vastness of it. And it's sheer beauty. Her eyes roamed the roving, rumbling waters and then fell down the banks where she and Roy had sat together. There, a dark brown horse stood sipping water by the edge. Beside her wagging tail stood a man with his hat in his hands.

Sannie heart rose to her throat.

*He's here.*

Her breath wasn't coming freely anymore—nervousness and excitement gushed through her, all at once. She knew he was here, but she still hadn't been *prepared* to see him.

She wanted to scream his name out loud, but she knew that might scare him. The mental image made Sannie giggle for a moment. *What is wrong with me right now?*

Shaking her head at herself, Sannie led Lady down toward the edge of the river. She knew Roy would hear the sound of her hooves and turn around of his own accord.

Sure enough, a minute later he looked up, narrowing his eyes at the imposition. The instant his landed on her, however, they widened.

*How can his eyes look so blue? Even in the dark?* Sannie wondered as she approached him. His rugged jaw fell down a bit as he watched her come closer.

Sannie stopped before him silently. Without taking her eyes off him, she dismounted Lady, letting her feet touch the ground below. She instinctively took off her shoes; she wanted to feel the soft grass underneath. She looked up at Roy.

“I thought you were gone,” he said gruffly, his eyes steady in her face.

Sannie gave him a small, cocky grin. “Did you really think I’d let you get away that easily? I *am* a dangerous criminal, you know. A true master of tracking.”

“Is that how you found me in this town?” Roy asked, his dark hair billowing in the windy night.

“That one was luck,” Sannie said seriously. “It was my luck that I found you again. Pure, dumb luck. The greatest I’ve ever had.”

Roy took in a deep breath, his eyes falling from her face for the first time. He looked pained. “Sannie, what are you doing here?” he asked.

“What are *you* doing, huh?” Sannie asked, walking closer to him. “You quit your job, Roy? Why?”

“How do you know about that?” he asked with a frown.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Sannie asserted, crossing her arms.

Roy rolled his eyes before looking back at the ground. “I didn’t want to stay there. I knew I’d have to investigate stolen diamonds with them and obviously I can’t do that, so I resigned.”

“Just leaving Little Rosa?” Sannie asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t... I didn’t want to be here anymore.” His voice was hard, as was his set jaw. “Sannie, why are you here?”

“I can’t let go of you again, Roy,” Sannie stated plainly without any pretense. “I don’t want to.”

“Sannie, I can’t go with you and the stolen diamonds,” Roy stated clearly. “I just can’t. I told you how I felt and I meant it. When I saw you get shot, I learned what the cost of this life is, and I can’t—”

“I gave up the diamonds, Roy,” Sannie interrupted him.

Roy’s jaw slackened a bit. He pulled his neck back a bit. “You what?”

“I gave them up,” Sannie said, brushing errant strands of her hair away from her face. “I met Agent Harrell at the jailhouse and handed them all over. That’s how I knew you quit. Philip told me.”

“You... You went to the jailhouse?” Roy asked, perplexed.

“Yes.”

“To give up the diamonds?”

“Yes,” Sannie said sagely.

“Why?” Roy asked her. “Why would you do that?”

Sannie took in a deep breath. “I figured it was time to stop running,” she said, looking into his eyes. “And it was time to start living an honest life.”

“I can’t believe you did that!” Roy exclaimed, his forehead scrunched up together as he tried to process what she’d told him. “You gave away priceless diamonds!”

“I know,” Sannie said with a self-deprecating chuckle. “Sounds like I’ve gotten stupider, huh?”

Roy chuckled and then paused uncomprehendingly. “So, wait, what happened then? Are you... going to jail?”

“That’s actually the best part,” Sannie said, grinning widely. “I totally sold out Ivan—gave away all his hidden stashes and their locations—for a completely clean chit.”

“What?” Roy asked unbelievably. “They didn’t want to try you for the stagecoach robbery?”

“Well, that’s the part where I wasn’t totally honest,” Sannie admitted with a sheepish grin. “Alice, the woman who was testifying against me? The witness?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, she didn’t testify,” Sannie stated. “In fact, she said that it wasn’t me who robbed the stagecoach.”

Roy shook his head slowly. “How did you get her to do that?”

“It was her idea!” Sannie said. “She came up with it. I think she likes me.”

Roy shook his head with a laugh, as though he could barely believe what she was saying.

*I can barely believe it either!* she thought joyously.

“Wait, so are you saying you’re ... *free*?” Roy asked, staring intently into her eyes.

“Yes,” Sannie whispered to him, feeling utterly breathless. “I’m free.”

Roy’s jaw completely dropped this time.

“I’m staying with you,” Sannie breathed, tears welling up in her eyes. “I’m not going anywhere, Roy—”

Roy reached toward her with his palm and covered her cheek with its warmth. Sannie sank into the feeling, letting him pull her toward him and press his lips to hers.

It was like an instant fire ignited at the point where their lips touched. Sannie sank into his body, letting hers press against his freely. He wrapped his other arm around her waist, holding her close to him as he kissed her lips softly once, twice, then thrice. His lips were soft but firm on hers, the scent of him intoxicated Sannie, making her dizzy. She held onto his shoulders as he pulled away from her,



his breath still hot in hers. His nose rubbed against hers as he inched away.

“You’re staying with me,” Roy breathed through a soft smile, as though he could barely believe it.

Sannie smiled back, her heart swelling up in her chest. “I’m staying with you. Better together.”

Roy’s sapphire eyes shined at her.

“Better together.”

**THE END?**  
**(turn the page)**

# Extended Epilogue

---

**Can't get enough of Sannie and Roy's  
story?**

Don't miss the complementary chapters  
featuring the beloved couple!



**CLICK/TAP here to get the Extended  
Epilogue (FREE)**

I guarantee you that you won't be  
disappointed

Then return, for an extra sweet treat from  
me...

*(turn the page)*

# Ready for your next Romance story?

---

Thank you for reading my Novel "**Brave Western Brides**"!

I hope you enjoyed this story! If yes, dive into my latest Amazon Best Seller Novel!  
[Find it here!](#)

**Or turn the page** to continue reading the first chapters of "**Healing the Rancher's Cold Heart**" my Amazon Best Selling Novel! Don't miss it!

*(turn the page)*



HEALING  
THE RANCHER'S  
COLD HEART

AVA WINTERS  
AMAZON BEST SELLING AUTHOR



# Healing the Rancher's Cold Heart



STAND-ALONE NOVEL

*A Western Historical Romance  
Book*

by

*Ava Winters*



# Blurb

---

**A tale as old as time. A Love as unique and unexpected as theirs. How long will they need to realize that true beauty lies within?**

Sarah Langley is a kind-hearted beautiful woman that would do anything to protect her family and save their small farm. Even though she recently lost her beloved mother, Sarah insists on smiling and believing that better days will come. Despite her innocent character, as a new mail order bride she will soon find out that good people can do bad things. Like her new husband. Will she silence the echoes of his past and trust him?

Christopher Norris is a distant, wounded rancher. He wishes to live secluded and he made sure he had enough money to do that. Even though people fear and respect him, he never turns his back on anyone in need. Especially now that he needs to act upon his greatest and most feared desire, to create a truly loving family. Will he ever realize that there is an honest and loving person in the world, and he is married to her?

When the truth about Christopher's past comes to light, he will have to open up to her. Sarah will have to face the ultimate test and trust her heart. How can Sarah and Christopher set everything aside and let their love grow?

# Chapter One

*Copper Crossing, Wyoming*

1873

The sun shone resplendently overhead; its warm orange glow cast like a blanket over Christopher Norris' ranch. The cool wind blew softly through the vibrant green fields that stretched for miles, tussling with the blades of grass and creating a pleasant noise like the churning of an incoming tide. It was a serene morning, the sheer definition of pleasant. The breeze passing worked perfectly in tandem with the warmth of the sun to leave one feeling instilled with optimism.

The sounds of hoof beats began rumbling off in the distance on the edge of the ranch, approaching the forested area that covered ten acres and was cordoned off by wooden fencing that stood eight feet high. It was meant to discourage any unwanted visitors from trespassing on the lands of a man who preferred peace and quiet to any kind of

human interaction. That man was Christopher Norris, coming toward the fence on horseback with perhaps the only other person in all of the state that Norris made even the slightest effort to maintain a shred of a relationship with—Hank Austin.

The two men rode side-by-side, passing several “No Trespassing” signs that were peppered throughout the ranch. Norris had made it a point to erect the fencing and the signs the day he won the ranch during a noteworthy poker hand he had played against the former owner just three years ago. He was always eager to keep himself at a distance from gambling houses: the places that offered him the only solace he had experienced in perhaps all of us life.

Norris and Hank came to a stop just outside the forest. Hank rubbed the back of his neck and grunting as he tightened his grip on the reins. He was a ginger-haired man, with a perpetual smile, who looked like no more than twenty-two years of age, when in fact he was twenty-seven.

“That *damned* mattress of mine,” Hank said. “I swear, I’ve been waking up with knots in my neck every morning, Christopher.”

Norris tilted up his hat with his index finger, adjusting his thin but sinewy frame clad in a leather jacket, and flashing the wryest of smiles to Hank as he removed the toothpick dangling on his lower lip. Norris was a ruggedly good-looking man; his raven-colored hair, piercing blue eyes, and sharp jawline instilled desire in pretty much every woman he came across. But Norris didn’t relish their regard. He was aware of the fact that he was good-looking, but it didn’t mean much to him. And he was surprised that the scar tracing from the lobe of his right ear down to his chin seemed more appealing than it did off-putting to the members of the fairer sex. But he also exuded a raw, stern quality so that, though his looks drew people toward him—the moment they came face-to-face with him, fear and uncertainty was struck into their hearts. He was a rebel, an outlaw, a man not to be trifled with; stories having been told about him on a daily basis that pushed any who briefly entertained the thought of taking pleasure in his company farther away.

“Don’t say it,” Norris said to Hank. “I know what you’re getting at.”

Hank placed his hand on his chest. “I’m not getting at anything, good buddy.”

Norris wagged his finger. “Yes, you are. You’re trying to prod me so that I’ll head into town and waste money on some kind of featherbed mattress as an excuse to converse with the townsfolk.”

Hank shrugged. “I’d prefer sleeping in my own home, quite frankly. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t trying to get you to stretch your legs and actually *talk* to another live human being. I can’t be your only friend, you know.”

“You’re not my friend,” Norris said with a smirk. “I don’t even like you all that much.”

Hank leaned in toward Norris. “And you’re near *intolerable*. You know that?”

The two men shared a laugh. Norris was not much on humor, but if anyone was able to make him crawl out of his shell and elicit a slight laughter, it was Hank. Norris had initially crossed paths with the loyal sap when he put up a notice in town asking for an able-bodied man looking for a good chunk of change to help him erect the barn on the property. Hank responded immediately to the bulletin, showing up unannounced the next day on Norris' ranch and being greeted by a double-barreled shotgun, held by Norris on the front porch.

“Just don't shoot me in the face,” Hank said at the time, holding his hands high in the sky. “My momma would probably prefer an open casket.”

Norris couldn't help but laugh. It helped break the ice, and three years and dozens of home projects later, Hank was still by his side. Still around. Still able to breathe a little bit of life into Norris' preferred style of reclusiveness. For Norris, Hank pretty much served as his only link to the real world, his companionship akin to that of a loyal dog's, though Norris would never say such a thing to

Hank's face.

Jutting his chin toward the fencing standing twenty yards ahead, Norris said, "Fence in sagging in about four places. We'll need to chop some wood and get it fixed before winter. Snow is supposed to hit us pretty hard, and that thing will give way after a couple of days. I don't want people or critters spilling in here if that happens."

"Maybe it'll be a good thing," Hank responded. "You'll make new friends. Maybe one of the townsfolk, maybe a talking squirrel you can go on adventures with, who knows?"

Norris rolled his eyes. "Are you still on that same subject? God in heaven, Hank. Give it a rest."

"No, I mean it. I'm starting to get concerned about you, buddy."

"I'm doing just fine, thank you."



Hank shifted his weight. “Oh, yeah? Then tell me something: when’s the last time you stepped foot off the property?”

*Eight months*, Norris’ mind gibbered. *Eight months and three days*. “Why does it matter?” he asked.

“Because being cooped up with just me isn’t the healthiest way to live.”

“We’ve got things to do around here. I don’t have time to go gallivanting around and making new friends.”

“Oh, *please*,” Hank huffed. “We’ve finished up all the major projects in the past three weeks. You’ve got nothing but time on your hands now.”

“Then what’s your brilliant suggestion, old friend? A night out on the town? We dress up like a pair of socialites and go about attending some aristocrat’s dinner party?”

Hank shrugged. “Hey, you got the money. It’s not like you have to want for anything, nowadays.”

Norris waved his hand dismissively. He knew he had money. It had been sheer happenstance that it turned out that way. He wasn’t the product of a rich family or tycoon who spread their wealth to blood relatives throughout the generations. He was a working man, one who had a modest upbringing, a man who simply rolled the dice one day and got lucky.

“Let it be, Hank,” Norris said, eager to reestablish silence. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Norris turned his horse away from Hank’s, surveying the fencing as an excuse to grant himself distance from the conversation—but he knew Hank was not going to abide by his wishes.

“I’m not going to let this down,” Hank said, riding after Norris. “It’s no good. You

can't be alone here all the time, and I can't be the only person serving as your connection to the world."

"It works out in my favor."

"Yeah, well, I'm not going to be around forever. You need more friends. Hell, you need a *woman*, Christopher."

Norris shook his head. He had been there once already before, and it ended in nothing but disaster. Norris' fortune had been made in gambling, but it had taken many missteps and misfortunes to get to that place. He had paid the prices for his mistakes several times over, including the time he had to marry the daughter of a wealthy rancher that he owed copious amounts of money to—and the fallout from that rash decision contributed significantly to making him the man he was today.

"No woman can stand me," Norris said. "That's just the facts of life."

Hank rolled his eyes. “Oh, *please*,” he said with a huff. “Now you’re just feeling sorry for yourself. Again, I’m all for indulging you with some type of soiree to get you out of the house, but it’s sure as heck not going to be *that* kind.”

“It’s the truth, Hank. I told you I was married before. Didn’t exactly turn out in my favor.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t say much past that.”

“Because it doesn’t warrant any further explanation.”

Hank clenched his fist and held it up playfully. “You’re a real gem, you know that?”

Norris sighed and sucked air through his teeth. “So, I’ve been told ...”

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Hank changed his tone and went about sounding more concerned. “I don’t want to ruffle your

feathers,” he said, “but I mean what I say—you need to step foot outside the property, Christopher. Whatever that means. Whatever that looks like.”

Norris turned his horse and faced his buddy. Emotions swirled inside him—concern, guilt, fear. It had been so long since he had any kind of interaction beyond the ones he had with Hank. Being that Hank was one of, if not *the best*, confidante he had ever allowed into his life, he couldn’t stop himself from being honest with how he felt. “I’m nervous, Hank,” he said, hanging his head slightly. “It’s that simple.”

Hank furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

Norris sighed. “I just ... I don’t know how to ... *talk to folks*. I really don’t. It’s always been that way, and the more time that passes, the more I don’t see people, the worse it gets. I come over as intimidating, threatening even.”

“Well, you know what the solution to that

is, right?"

Norris shook his head—*No. Tell me.*

"By diving in headfirst," Hank said. "Putting yourself out there. Breaking the ice. *Trying*, in so many words."

Norris grunted. "I'm not good at parties, my friend. Even at my best."

"I'm not saying you need to dress up and go to Brinkley's Tavern with all the socialites. Your outing could just be as simple as stopping in town to *buy* wood for the reinforcements you need to make on the fence and having a conversation with the lumberyard owner. Hell, maybe start by taking *down* the fences. You don't need them, and it's made folks in town hot under the collar because it's limited the range that nearby cattle can graze through."

Norris nodded. "The townsfolk aren't the biggest fans of me, that's for damn sure."

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Christopher. You’re a decent man. Not much to take in looks-wise, but a decent man, nonetheless. You just prefer to put on this display of ... I don’t know... *gruff*, for lack of a better way of putting it.”

Norris laughed again. “Hank, old buddy,” he said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Hank went to offer another retort—but then a twig snapped ahead of them. Norris cocked his head toward the source of the noise, his eyes turning into slits and his senses on edge. His listening became hypersensitive, his eyes scanning the forested area. He felt like he did back during the war, when anyone and anything served as a potential threat.

“I heard it, too,” Hank said. “Where’s it coming from?”

A second twig snapped, and this time Norris responded by pulling the repeater rifle he had stuffed into the holster hanging by his

thigh. Instantly, Norris chambered a round into the rifle, gripped the handle tight, nuzzled the stock into his shoulder, and took aim at something in the distance.

“There he is,” Norris said, closing one eye and curling his finger around the trigger.

Near a sagging part of the fence tracing the property, hunched down near a pair of tall pines, a gaunt man in a tan coat cast a look straight in Hank and Norris’ direction. Hank, his eyes going wide, reached out toward Norris’ arm as Norris squeezed the trigger. A cannon-like reverberation rang out through the property as the round tore up the bark just above the intruder’s head; the intruder threw his hands up and fled but dropped something thick and furry clutched in his right hand.

The smoke cleared as the man ran away. Hank huffed with relief once he saw that Norris’s shot had missed the intruder completely.

“*Damn it, Christopher!*” Hank hollered.



“You almost killed him.”

Norris chambered another round and lowered the rifle as he tracked the man running away. “No, I didn’t,” he said. “I was just trying to scare him off.”

Norris slapped the reins on his horse, still clutching the rifle with one hand as he rode toward the area where the intruder had stood. On the ground lay a pair of dead rabbits, and Norris stuffed the rifle back into its holster, dismounted, and picked the rabbits up. “Looks like we’ve got dinner secured.”

Hank rubbed the back of his neck. “What are you doing, Christopher? Taking pot shots at the townsfolk isn’t exactly going to get you on their good side.”

“I told you, I was just trying to scare him off.”

“You could have hollered at him.”

“How do I know he doesn’t have a gun?”

Hank sighed. “This is what I’m talking about,” he said. “You need to get out of here. I can’t take no for an answer. You’re starting to turn into that surly old man who yells at people to get off of his porch.”

Norris continued watching the intruder flee, the man waving his hands wildly and Norris realizing, based on the color of the man’s coat, that he was one of his nearby neighbors and was most likely doing nothing more than hunting for his noon meal. *Oh, rats,* he thought. *I shouldn’t have done that. Now I’ve got Mr. Langley scared of me, too.*

“I know that man,” Norris said, jutting his chin. “Tripp Langley. He lives about a half-mile from here.”

Hank shook his head. “That’s good, boss. I guess we’ll add him to your running list of folks who want nothing to do with you.”

Norris crossed his arms, feeling like the

more he tried to embrace solitude, the more that solitude seemed to evade him. *Maybe Hank is right. Maybe I do need to stretch my legs for a bit.*

“Let me ask you,” he said to Hank. “What would your plan be, in regard to getting me more ... *integrated* with the locals?”

A sliver of a smile flashed across Hank’s face. “I’ll tell you my plan only if you agree to do as I say,” he replied. “Will you do it?”

Norris looked at his friend and squinted. “Within reason ...”

Cocking his head, Hank laughed and turned his horse back toward the direction they had come from. “Follow me,” he said. “I think I have a few ideas.”

Hank took off, Norris waiting a beat before following. “Why do I feel that I’m in for a long night?” he said before slapping the reins and starting off.

But there was something that Norris was withholding from Hank, something he had set into motion just a few days prior—an ad he'd placed in the local paper seeking the companionship of a single woman who would be willing to take his hand in marriage.

# Chapter Two

Sarah Langley was singing. She was *always* singing. According to her father, Tripp, it was a trait she inherited from her mother—that and her shorter frame, curves, and beaming smile formed by full lips that people tended to gravitate toward whenever she showed it off, which was more often than not.

“Sing that other one,” Sarah’s younger sister Louisa called from the left, on her hands and knees (just like Sarah was) as they tended the modest garden in the front of their family home. “That one that Momma used to sing.”

Sarah smiled, looking up at her younger sibling with big eyes that shone amber. “The one she sang when she was working in the garden?” she asked.

Louisa, who had similar features to that of her sister, nodded and smiled in reply.

Sarah began crooning as she tended the carrot patch, her voice sweet and uplifting. *Oh, Lord, she thought. They're withering away. They're not getting enough water.*

She held up her head, looking around the property and seeing that most of it was starting to decline—the roof of the one-story home painted green and white was sagging. The paint was chipping. The grass that used to cover the entire property was mostly dirt now, and the robust number of livestock they used to have had been depleted to the single scrawny cow behind the picket fence and looking as if it were on the cusp of death.

*Oh, how this land was once resplendent,* Sarah thought. *So much green. So much love. So much optimism.* But those times were long gone. It was as if a plague had swept through the land, wiping out all traces of hope and love, and leaving only a depleted patch of dirt in its wake.

“She’s not long for this world,” Louisa said, Sarah sensing that her sister was lost in thought as she nodded toward the cow. “Is

she?”

But Sarah smiled. She *always* smiled. There was no other way for her to handle a dire situation. It was the same way she had coped and got through her mother's illness not so long ago—beaming as best she could through the whole ordeal and offering her siblings as much encouragement as she could even in the midst of her own sadness. *Things will be all right*, she told herself as she looked at the emaciated cow. *Things will certainly get better.*

“She just needs some rest,” Sarah said to Louisa. “There's no use in being dour.”

Louisa nodded. “I suppose you're right. She's just looking awful scrawny lately, and she's been making these odd noises at night. It's almost like she's, I don't know, *sad*, maybe.”

“Because she's *miserable*,” the dour voice of Mariah Langley called out from behind Sarah. “Just like we all are.”

Sarah huffed, closing her eyes for a brief moment. *Don't let her get to you. She's just trying to get a rise out of you.* She turned, offering up a small wave to Mariah. "There you are," she said. "We could have used an extra hand over here."

"What's the point?" Mariah shrugged. "There's no way you're going to get that garden up to snuff in time for the next season." She nodded to the garden. "*Look* at it. None of those damn plants are even growing."

Sarah stood, smoothing the wrinkles in her cornflower blue prairie dress, her auburn hair tied in a braid and glowing under the sun. "Don't do this," she said to Mariah. "Please."

Mariah, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms, smiled sardonically, and replied: "*Do what?*"

"Don't be like this. It doesn't help anything."



“*Ha. You must be joking.*” She gestured to the garden. “Look at that dirt patch. Nothing you two have done in the past few days is working *at all.*”

“So, being mean helps us how, exactly?”

Mariah’s wry smile faded, turning into a scowl as she uncrossed her arms, turned away and began walking toward the fields.

“Is she okay?” Louisa inquired.

Sarah wiped her hands off and held up the “one minute” gesture to her sister. “I’ll go check on her. Just keep tending to the garden. You’re doing great.”

She ended up following Mariah as she walked out into the fields, giving the second born of the family a bit of distance and feeling the chagrin practically radiating off of her. *She’s trying, she thought. She’s just a bit more surly than usual. It’s been a tough year. I can’t really blame her. She’s trying as best as she can. And she’s young. I have five and seven years on*

*both of my sisters. It wasn't much different when I was a teenager, either.*

Mariah came to a stop in the center of the field, looking off to the east, most likely past the town of Copper Crossing and toward the cities and countries she had always longed to see. Sarah knew this because Mariah always spoke about it in such vivid detail.

“Are you okay?” Sarah inquired. “What’s troubling you?”

“That’s a silly question,” Mariah said, sucking air through her teeth. “Where should we start?”

Sarah took a step forward. “Don’t be this way. Just talk to me. You know I’ll listen.”

Taking a beat to think, Mariah turned around and threw up her hands. “Why are we still here? What is the point of all of this?”

“The point of *what*?”

“Tending to this dilapidated farm, this dying livestock, all of it. Poppa is wasting everyone’s time staying here. There’s no point to.”

“He’s trying to make it work. We’re just going through a rough patch right now.”

Sarah’s younger sister wagged her finger and took a step forward. “No,” she said, a stern inflection in her tone. “We can’t make this work. We shouldn’t be here.”

Old memories began to resurface in Sarah’s mind, times of strife and torment, all of it having taken place on their homestead. “This is our *home*,” she said. “Father fought hard for this land. This is where we were born, where we were raised.”

“And I don’t want it to be the place where we wither away and die!” Mariah exclaimed. “The only reason Poppa still has us staying here is because it’s the last link we have to...” She stopped short; her eyes laced with guilt.

Sarah knew full-well what her sister was insinuating—but she felt the need to make Mariah say it out loud, if only to honor the memory of the person she was speaking of more than anything else. “Say it,” she said calmly. “The last link we have to *who*?”

Hanging her head and looking away, Mariah replied: “Mother. To our *mother*. You know this to be the truth, Sarah. Our father can’t let go of this place because he can’t let go of the past.”

“He simply wants to make it work here. He wants to fix this place up and make it like it once was.”

“That will never happen. This place is cursed. You saw what it did to Mother.”

Sarah brought a hand to her face and closed her eyes. “There’s no such things as curses, Mariah. Mother didn’t die because of *superstition*. You know that.”

“All I know,” Mariah said, “is that there is no place for us here. We should leave. We should go as far away from here as possible.”

“And go *where*?”

A shrug from Mariah. “The city. *Any* city.”

Sarah shook her head. “The city is *twice* as expensive as living in the country, Mariah. If you think we can’t make it work here—it’s *impossible* to do it in a place where it is double, sometimes *triple* what it is to live here.”

Silence held sway for a moment as Mariah contemplated, turning back to the east and looking longingly off in the distance. “Well,” she said, “we have to do *something*. Once that last cow of ours passes, there’s nothing left for us here. We’ll end up looking just like she does in no time.”

It saddened Sarah to hear her sister’s words—but she knew some of them to be true. Sure, she would have approached the situation

with a little more care and finesse in her tone but, looking at herself and her sisters and seeing that they were dropping dress sizes every few weeks, only confirmed the fact that food was becoming scarce, and the land was no longer livable. She opened her mouth to offer up more encouragement to her sister—but she was cut short when she heard the panting and heaving of her father’s breathing as he approached them from behind.

“Daddy?” Sarah said, turning to face him. “Heavens, are you okay?”

Sweat peppered her father’s brow as the older man bent over and braced himself on his knees as he caught his breath. His auburn hair—which Sarah had inherited—glistened in the light as Sarah placed her hand on his back.

“Good Lord!” she said. “You’re *soaking*, Daddy!”

Tripp forked a finger over his shoulder. “That man next door,” he said, through panted breaths. “Whatever his name is. He just took a

shot at me.”

Sarah held a hand to her chest, her heart racing at the news. “He tried to *shoot* you, Daddy?”

The patriarch of the family waved his daughter off. “No, no,” he said. “He missed me by a mile. It was certainly on purpose. I just think he believes I was trespassing is all.”

“Were you?” Mariah said sarcastically.

Cocking her head to the side, Sarah looked at her sister and shook her head subtly—*Please, don’t ...*

Tripp stood up, finally having caught his breath. “Well,” he said, “do you want the bad news or the bad news?”

Rubbing circles on Tripp’s back, Sarah said: “Don’t phrase it like that, Daddy. I’m sure everything is all right.”

Her father shook his head. “It’s not. I dropped the rabbits I fetched for supper.”

Sarah immediately looked at Mariah, sensing a short response on its way to being delivered—and to her chagrin, it was.

“Are you kidding?” Mariah said. “So, all we have is those mangy vegetables to eat?”

Sarah patted her father on the back. “Go inside and fetch some water, Poppa,” she said. “I’ll be in a minute.”

Tripp kissed his daughter on the cheek and headed toward the house, greeting his other daughter near the garden as he headed inside.

Sarah, feeling more heated than was usual for her, and then leveled a gaze at Mariah. “What is wrong with you?” she said.

“What?” Mariah objected.



“The comments aren’t helping. If you’re not going to say anything nice, don’t say anything at all. That man is working as hard as he can, and he doesn’t need us giving him a hard time. Do you understand?”

The tone of her voice was authoritative, full of resolve. Sarah was well aware of this. She knew that Mariah would hear this and hear their mother.

Mariah, hanging her head, nodded and said: “I’m sorry. Really.”

Sarah said, “Then come with me. Tell the old man to his face.”

They moved to the house together, where inside they found Tripp standing near the window with a glass of water in his hand. Sarah couldn’t help but note the longing on his face.

“Are you okay, Daddy?” Mariah said. “I’m sorry for what I said.”

Tripp put the glass down on an end table and turned to face his daughters, forcing himself to smile as he shrugged and his eyes watered. “I just,” he began with a trembling tone, “feel like I’m failing you. *All* of you. I’m supposed to provide for this family, and ... I’m *failing!*”

He brought his hands to his face, as his daughters rushed to him. They pulled him in close, hugging him tight and pressing their cheeks against his chest.

“You’re not failing, Daddy,” Sarah said. “That’s not what’s happening.”

“No cattle,” Tripp said. “No dairy, no food, no vegetables. How am I *not* failing?”

“Because it’s just a rough time, is all. That’s simply what it is. We just need to wait for the tide to turn.”

Sarah looked over at Mariah, trying to urge her with her eyes to saying something encouraging to her father. As she did so—she

couldn't help but see a pensive look on Mariah's face, as if she were thinking of something, *planning* something. *What is that girl thinking of?* she pondered.

"Thank you, girls," Tripp said. "I feel better, honestly. It's just been a long day."

Pulling herself away, Mariah said, "Daddy, take a seat for a moment. Relax. I need to talk to Sarah for a moment."

Mariah beckoned Sarah to follow her into the back bedroom. Curiosity getting the better of her, Sarah followed her younger sister, walked inside, and closed the door behind them.

"What's going on?" Sarah asked.

Wringing her fingers and biting her lower lip, Mariah said, "You've worked so hard, Sarah, for *all* of us, especially after Momma passed."

“You don’t need to say that. We’re family. Of *course*, I’m going to do whatever I can.”

Mariah took a step forward. “What if ... what if I said ... I had an idea?”

Sarah flexed her brow. “I’d have to say that I’m concerned and terrified all at once.”

“Don’t be!” Mariah said, holding up her hands. “I think I have a good idea. A *very* good idea, actually, and it’s one that can serve *everyone* in this family.”

Sarah eyeballed a chair in the corner and moved to it, sitting down to hear her kid sister’s proposition. “I’m willing to have a conversation,” she said, “but the last time this happened, you suggested that we try and burn down the house for insurance.”

“I was *joking*. I’m quite serious about this proposition, I assure you.”

Drawing a breath, Sarah said, “Okay,

Mariah. I'm listening. What is it that you had in mind?"

Mariah moved toward the wooden credenza resting flush against the wall, opening the top drawer slowly and pulling out a folded sheet of newspaper. Clutching it tightly in both hands like a bible, she turned and faced Sarah and said, "What if I told you that we could get *paid* to marry you off?"

Slack jawed and heart racing, Sarah held a hand to her mouth and nearly passed out as one thought flashed through her mind: *You must be joking...*

# Chapter Three

“Tell me you are not serious,” Sarah said, holding her head in her hands. “Tell me that this is not something you feel will be an *actual* solution to the problem.”

Mariah’s half smile crept into the corners of her mouth. “Hear me out!” she said. “This is not the worst of ideas.”

Sarah stood up from the bed. “It certainly isn’t the *best*! Mariah, I’m not about to let myself be ... *sold* to some old man who can’t attract a woman based on his own merits.”

“It’s not that black-and-white. Some of these men that are posting these ads are simply looking for companionship; they’re men not much older than you and I.”

Mariah held up the paper, walking over to Sarah as Sarah sat back down on the edge of the bed. *Lord*, Sarah thought, *why do you allow*

*such ideas to be planted in this girl's mind?*

“Just let me explain,” Mariah said, cozying up next to her sister.

Sarah flexed her brow. “I did. And I don’t like the proposition.”

Mariah laid the paper on Sarah’s lap, with the classified/matrimonial section facing up. “See here,” she said. “There are several men who have placed ads, all of them residing in this area or close to it.”

It was an incredulous notion to Sarah, foreboding at the very least. “What are the odds that they are honest about their intentions? How do we not know that these men aren’t scoundrels simply looking to lure a woman into their homestead for God only knows what kind of other motives?”

“You’re being foolish. You haven’t even *looked* at the paper.”

“I don’t need to.”

“Please, Sarah!” Mariah said, grabbing her sister’s arm. “Just let me read the one that I saw. *Please?*”

The look in Mariah’s eye was sincere. Sarah could tell when her younger sister was being facetious and when she was being honest. *She wants to help*, she pondered. *She sincerely thinks that this will be a solution to our problems.*

Sighing, Sarah nodded and blinked slowly, not wanting to say anything out loud but indicating to Mariah that it was okay to continue.

Mariah’s finger drifted toward the bottom of the ads. Sarah let her own eyes glance over the preceding ads and found that most of them were somewhat unrefined, men inquiring about woman based on physical specifications and a common theme of “needing physical comfort.” It disgusted her. It was almost as if the paper was an intermediary between a



prostitute and their Madame, a watered-down way of eliciting physical satisfaction over actual companionship.

“Right here,” Mariah said, pointing to the last ad at the bottom edge of the paper. “This man here. Read what he has to say.”

Sarah lifted the paper, clearing her throat as she set about reading the ad listed at the bottom. “To the potential woman whose eye this may catch,” she said out loud, “I do not relish placing something in this paper in regard to finding companionship. I roll my eyes even now as I set about writing this. But a man in my position, a man with a history such as I have, finds that conventional methods are no longer a means of being able to find what I am looking for.”

Interesting, Sarah’s mind gibbered. This man seems to have written a poem instead of an ad...

“I am a local of Copper Crossing,” Sarah continued. “I have been for some time. I own

an extensive property that I have been working on and, being that I have been somewhat confined to my land, I have not been able to interact with members of the fairer sex if anyone at all. I am thirty-three years of age and have been married once before. Perhaps, in many ways, this is why I am so reticent to engage in finding a significant other by traditional methods. I am physically active, I have no vices other than reclusiveness, and I seek to find someone who will happily join me as I attempt to create a life for myself. I am not sure what else to say other than I look forward to your response, and perhaps then, we can get to know each other more.”

Sarah placed down the paper, intrigued and still a slight bit apprehensive at reading the ad. “Interesting,” she said. “Seems like a lonely gentleman. But he didn’t state his name.”

“They usually don’t. You wait to meet them in person.”

Sarah shook her head. “I’m skeptical of

this gentleman, Mariah. We know nothing about him.”

“We know that he is a gentleman with *money*,” Mariah insisted, holding up a single finger. “It is quite obvious.”

Sarah squinted, skeptical. “How can you tell?”

Mariah pointed to the ad. “You have to pay per word when posting these ads. This man wrote *far more* than the others, which means that he has a significant bankroll.”

Sarah huffed as she stood from the bed. “So, that’s what the end goal is in all of this, Mariah—*money*?”

Mariah shook her head. “No, at least, not strictly that. You read his words. He does not speak like the rest of the men that listed in this section of the paper. He sounds sincere. He sounds lonely. He sounds like someone who is genuinely looking for companionship.”

Sarah lingered near the window, looking out toward the property and seeing her father wandering aimlessly in the fields. He was rubbing the back of his neck, shaking his head as he stared on at the feeble cow traipsing around slowly. “How does it work?” she asked.

“How does what work?”

“The money. This is a mail-order situation, is it not?”

“It’s not that black-and-white.”

Sarah shook her head. “But it is. No matter how this man may sound, money is still involved in this ... *transaction*. Is it not?”

Her younger sister shrugged, huffing and holding out her hands in submission. “It is part of it,” she said, “yes. But I don’t know how much or what the details entail. You have to write this man back first then you have to meet him. Only then do you go about discussing any of the, I don’t know what to

call it, *finances*.”

This is insane, Sarah thought. I don't want to be ... sold off to someone. I always wanted a husband; I always wanted a partner... but I don't want it to be this way. I never would have imagined it being this way. Can't it be more traditional? Can't it be like the fairytales I read of as a child?

She felt a hand on her shoulder, Mariah squeezing gently to bring her out of her haze. “What are you thinking of, sister?” Mariah inquired.

Sarah was at a loss for words, shrugging. “This is not how I thought it would be,” she said. “I never thought I would be looking for love in a newspaper. I wanted it to be ... I don't know... *different*.”

“That's not how life works, Sarah. You know that. When has anything in our lives gone according to how we planned it? Look at Father. Look at Mother. Look at this ranch. Nothing, not one thing, has ever gone

according to how we thought it would be. Maybe we have to stop pursuing the things we want in a manner that caters to our fantasies of how we'd go about acquiring them. Perhaps ... I don't know... perhaps we need to *adjust our methods*. Think. *Think*."

Turning and facing her sister, Sarah, for the first time in a while, felt Mariah's cold and somewhat bitter attitude beginning to fade. She heard resolve, true tenacity, a girl, no, a *woman*, who was set on not only aiding Sarah in securing the life she always wanted, but also doing it in a way that helped her family get back on their feet. Sarah was not sold on the idea—but she was willing to entertain it for a while longer.

"So," Sarah said, sighing and rubbing her hands together from the tension. "I just ... reply to the ad? Is that how this works?"

Mariah smiled. "Yes. You write a response and mail it back to the P.O. box that's listed."

"And after that?"

Mariah shrugged. “We wait. Well, *you* wait for a reply, I suppose.”

“And if there isn’t any?”

“Then he must not like you very much.”

Sarah couldn’t help but laugh at her sister’s quip. It was hard not to give credit to the fact that her slightly surly attitude granted her a quick wit. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll write a response and give it to you. *You* can mail it in.”

Mariah clapped her hands together. “Yes! Perfect!”

“*But*,” Sarah said, holding up her index finger, “if I don’t like this at any point, I’m allowed to back away.”

“Of course! Absolutely.”

It was impossible for Sarah not to roll her

eyes again, completely taken aback by her own actions as she gave into her sister's wishes. "Go and see if Father needs any help," she said. "He looks troubled. That's all I ask of you."

A nod from Mariah. "I will."

Sarah reached out and took Mariah's hand into her own, squeezing it softly to show that she truly meant the words she was about to speak. "And no more," she said.

Mariah squinted curiously. "No more *what?*"

"No more saying things that will upset our sister or our father. We are having a hard-enough time as it is trying to make ends meet. They don't need the extra burden. They need our support. You understand?"

Mariah hung her head. "I do."

"It's not that I don't understand where you



are coming from, sister. I feel your pain. I understand it quite well. We just both go about dealing with it in very different ways.”

A sliver of a smile came into Mariah’s expression. “You got that from Mother,” she said. “I think the compassion, that she used to show has evaded me.”

Sarah cupped Mariah’s face with her hands. “No,” she said, “it did not evade you. You took more of her strength than I did.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are *tough*, Mariah. You have a strength that I wish I could possess. You don’t take any nonsense from anyone, and I wish that I was more, I don’t know, willing to put my foot down in certain situations like you do. It makes you competent.”

Mariah looked away, a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. “Or unlikable.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. Let’s be honest, only one of us is properly suited to find a husband, and it is certainly not me.”

Sarah pulled her sister in close; wrapping her arms around her like a warm blanket and feeling Mariah go comfortably limp. “Don’t say such things. They are definitely not true. I never want to hear you speak in such a manner again. Do you understand?”

Mariah pulled away, looking Sarah in the eyes as a single tear slid down her cheek. “I love you, Sarah,” she said.

Leaning in, Sarah planted a kiss on Mariah’s head and said, “I love you, too, Mariah,” before embracing her one more time, and feeling her heart race as she began contemplating what words she was going to put down on paper in response to the ad.

\*\*\*

Night had fallen. Sarah was seated at the table with the vanity mirror in her bedroom, darkness having engulfed the room, save for the single candle burning and offering a meager illumination.

In front of her was a single sheet of paper and a pen. Ten minutes had passed since she sat down, and she was still unable to find the proper words to put down on the page. She stood, shaking her head and feeling adrenaline coursing through her body. *Stop overthinking it*, she pondered. *Just write what you're feeling...*

She paced for a few moments, drawing in a few deep breaths before seating herself back down and picking up the pen. She pressed it to the paper, hesitating, but only for a second, before she set about writing her reply to the ad:

Dear potential suitor,

My name is Sarah Langley, and I am

writing to you in response to your ad. I find that your words are quite appealing and being that I have been confined to my setting in a similar manner that you have stated, I am willing to have a conversation with you to discuss the possibility of you being my suitor. I am in my mid-twenties, I live with my family, and I am well suited to take on the duties that you have specified you are looking for. I look forward to meeting you in person and discussing this with you more.

Sincerely,

S.L.

Sarah then placed down the pen, folded up the note and headed out of the bedroom. She crept to Mariah's room, knocking once lightly on the door and being greeted by an eager Mariah seconds later.

"Is it finished?" her younger sister inquired.

Sarah said nothing, merely holding up the

letter and handing it over. Mariah nodded, smiling subtly, as she took the paper, ducked back into her room, and closed the door.

Sarah retreated to her bedroom, feeling as if she was releasing a breath she had been holding for several hours. She lingered near the window, the glow of the moon shining brightly overhead as she looked out at her family's land and saw the decrepit sagging barn roof cast in a silver glow, as if highlighted, reminding her of why she wrote the response. Suddenly she desperately hoped that it would yield positive results. *We can't go on like this any longer. What will happen to us if I can't do something to help?*

She donned her nightgown before resting on her back on the bed, closing her eyes and folding her hands across her chest as she conjured up images of what the suitor looked like. *Have I done the right thing? What if this will lead to a situation even worse than my current one?*

**Want to know how the story ends?**

**Get my "Healing the Rancher's Cold**

**Heart"**

**Get This Book for FREE with Kindle  
Unlimited!**

# Also, by Ava Winters

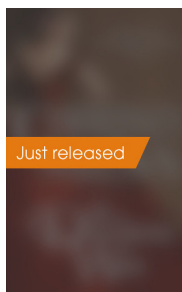
---

Thank you for reading "A Redeeming Love in the West"!

I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, please write [your honest review here!](#)

It would mean the world to me. Reviews are crucial and allow me to keep writing the books you love to read!

Do you want to be up to date with my latest story?



[Click here to read my latest Novel](#)

Some of my Best-Selling Books

**#1** [The Courageous Bride's Unexpected Family](#)

- #2 The Rancher's Unexpected Love
- #3 A Bounty on Their Scarred Hearts
- #4 His Blessing in Disguise
- #5 The Salvation of Claire Hernandez

**Thank you for allowing me to keep  
doing what I love!**